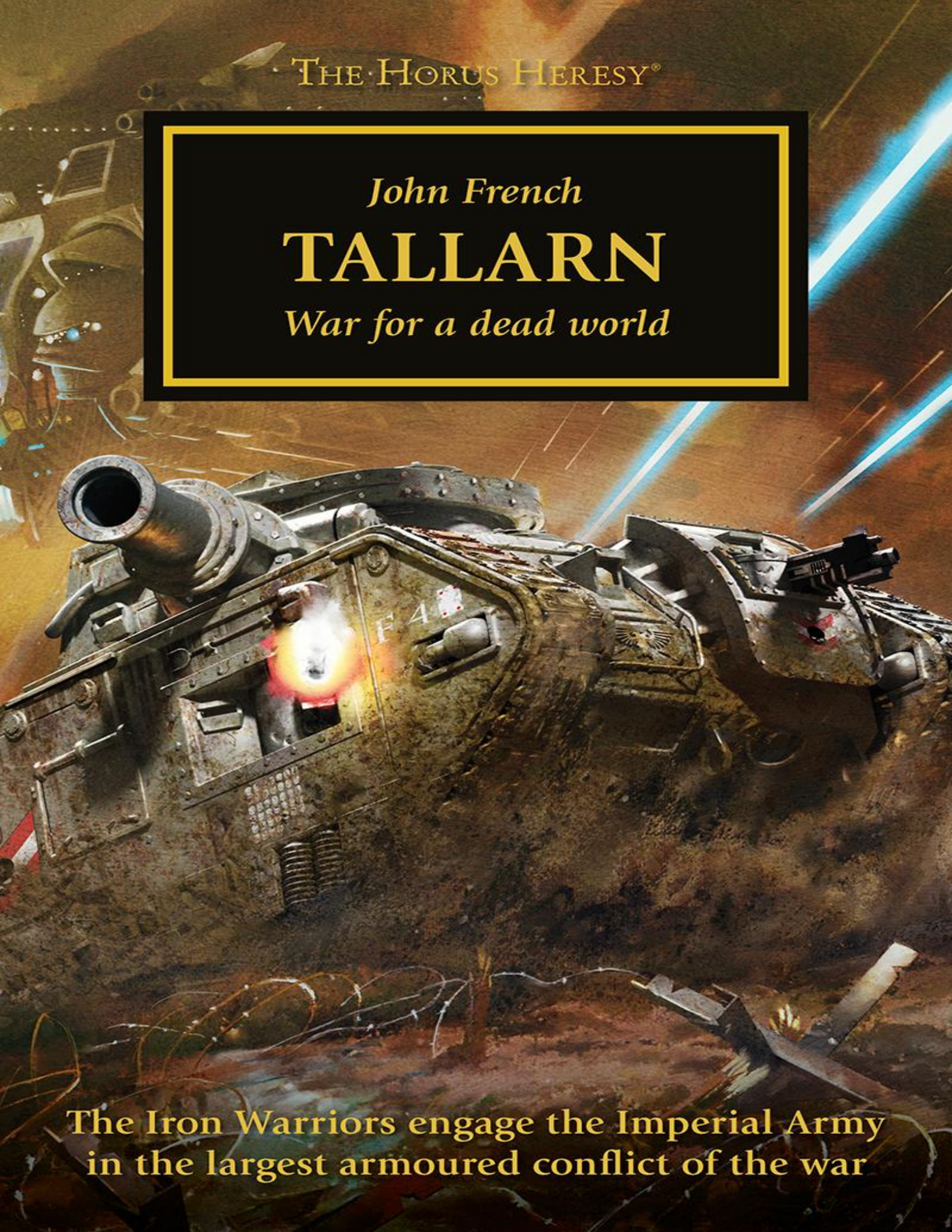
THE HORUS HERESY®

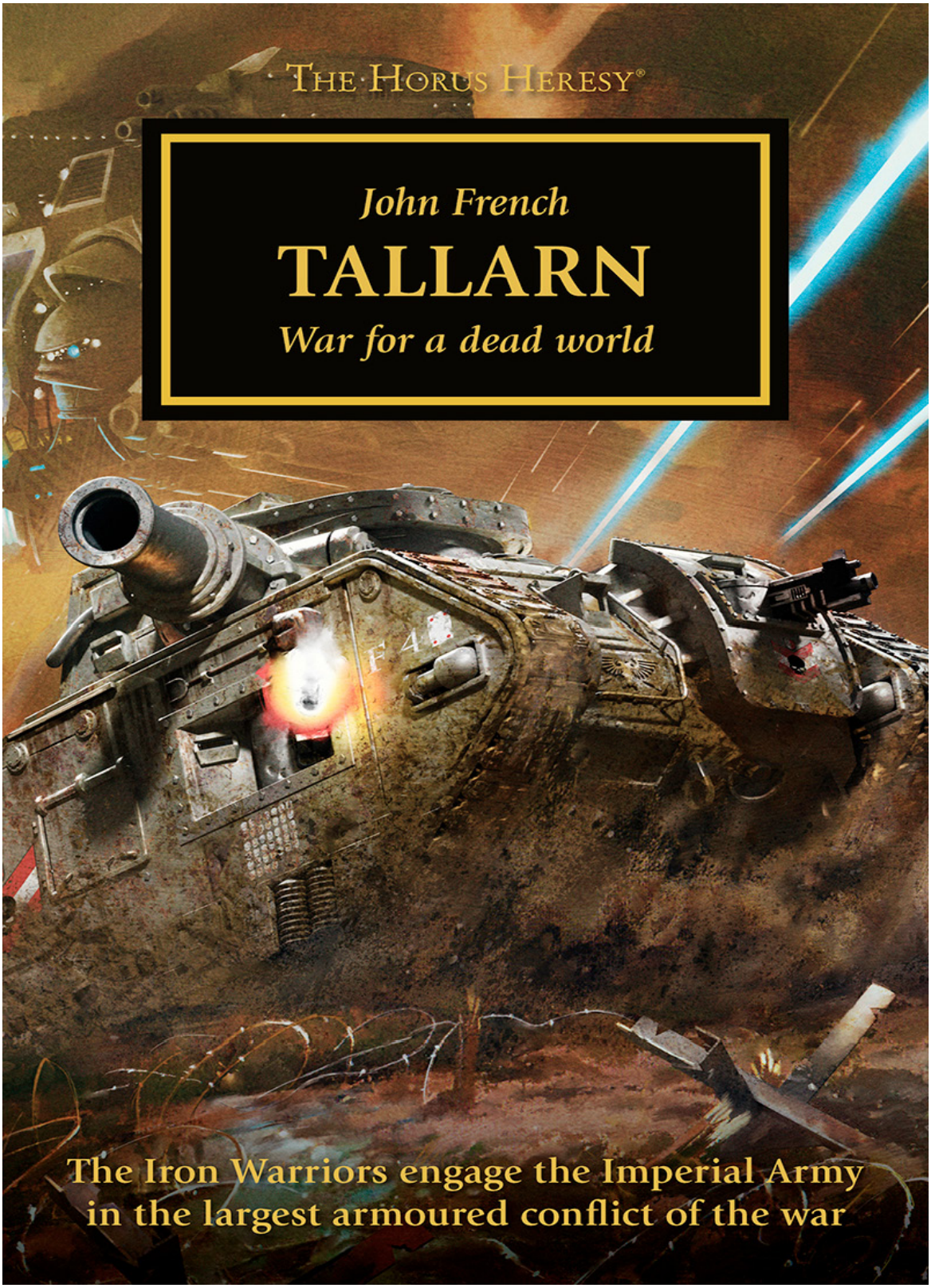
John French

TALLARN

War for a dead world



The Iron Warriors engage the Imperial Army in the largest armoured conflict of the war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War for a dead world
The Iron Warriors engage the Imperial Army
in the largest armoured conflict of the war

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THE HORUS HERESY®

John French

TALLARN

War for a dead world

BLACK LIBRARY

THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

Imperial Personae

Dellasarius, Governor-Militant of Tallarn
Susada Syn, Designated successor of Dellasarius

Akil Sulan, Merchant prince of the Sapphire City
Sabir, Prefectus, Tallarn government administration
Gatt, Menial, Tallarn government administration
Kulok, Citizen

Tahirah, Lieutenant, First Squadron commander, Amaranth Company, Jurnian 701st
Lachlan, Gunner, 111 Executioner *Lantern*
Makis, Driver, 111 Executioner *Lantern*
Vail, Loader, 111 Executioner *Lantern*
Udo, Sponson gunner, 111 Executioner *Lantern*
Genji, Sponson gunner, 111 Executioner *Lantern*

Hector, Corporal, commander, 112 Executioner *Deathlight*

Brel, Sergeant, commander, 113 (field attachment) Vanquisher *Silence*
Jallinika, Gunner, 113 (field attachment) Vanquisher *Silence*
Calsuriz, Driver, 113 (field attachment) Vanquisher *Silence*
Selq, Loader, 113 (field attachment) Vanquisher *Silence*

Rashne, Gunner/signaller, 114 (field attachment) scout vehicle *Talon*

Silas Kord, Colonel commanding Tallarn 71st, 001 Malcador assault tank *War Anvil*
Mori, Driver, 001 Malcador assault tank *War Anvil*
Zade, First Gunner, 001 Malcador assault tank *War Anvil*
Sacha, First Loader, 001 Malcador assault tank *War Anvil*
Saul, Forward Gunner, 001 Malcador assault tank *War Anvil*
Kogetsu, Sponson Gunner, 001 Malcador assault tank *War Anvil*

Shornal, Sponson Gunner, 001 Malcador assault tank *War Anvil*

Abbas, Lieutenant, 111 Vanquisher *Mourner*, First Squadron commander, Tallarn 71st

Zekenilla, Lieutenant, 211 Executioner *Noon Star*, Second Squadron commander, Tallarn 71st

Orrigo, Lieutenant, lead scout vehicle *Razor*, Tallarn 71st

Augustus Fask, Colonel, Crescent Shelter command staff

Elo Sussabarka, Brigadier-elite, commander of the Rachab fortress

Adeptus Astra Telepathica

Prophesius, Metatron

Halakime, Astropath

The Dark Mechanicum

Sota-Nul, Disciple of Kelbor-Hal

Officio Assassinorum

Iaeo, Unbound Infocyte, Omega Tabulation, Clade Vanus

Navis Nobilite

Hes-Thal, Black Oculus Navigator

The IV Legion 'Iron Warriors'

Perturabo, Primarch of the Iron Warriors

Forrix, 'The Breaker', First Captain, triarch

Hrend, 'The Ironclad', Contemptor-class Dreadnought, commander of Cyllaros armoured assault group

Jarvak, Commander, Sicaran '78/5', lieutenant of Cyllaros group

Orun, Castraferrum-class Dreadnought (Mortis-pattern) Cyllaros group

Gortun, Contemptor-class Dreadnought, Cyllaros group

Volk, Commander of Sightless Warren (Core Reach I), Master of 786th Grand Flight armada

Taldak, Warrior of the 17th Grand Battalion elite

The VII Legion 'Imperial Fists'

Lycus, Marshal, commander of the *Light of Inwit*

The X Legion 'Iron Hands'

Menoetius, Commander, Predator *Cretatogran*

The XVI Legion 'Sons of Horus'

Argonis, 'The Unscarred', emissary of the Warmaster, Chieftain of the Isidis Flight

The XX Legion 'Alpha Legion'

Thetacron, Commander, Harrow Group Arcadus

Others

Jalen

WITNESS

394 days after
the death of Tallarn

‘Forgetting is history’s compassion for the truth of the past.’

– General Elite Helicade,
in his 51st missive to the Council of Terra

The last Titan left on Tallarn bore the world’s new master across the dust plains. It was a lonely god. Its brothers and sisters waited in the heavens, cocooned in the bellies of ships, healing and arming for the next battle. When this final task was done it would join them, but until then it strode on with the weariness of a wounded soldier. The wind rattled against its pitted grey skin, and pulled a caul of dust over its shoulders. Every few hundred metres it paused and shivered, damaged gears and clogged pistons clanking.

Above its head, the sky was clear blue.

Susada Syn, now the designated Governor-Militant of Tallarn, looked out from the Titan’s eyes at the dry land.

My land, he thought, and coughed. The wound on the left side of his chest flared with pain. He blinked, but did not let the discomfort show on his face. At least, he hoped that it did not show on his face.

Beside him, the looming presence of Kalikgol remained unmoving, the White Scar’s eyes fixed on the scene beyond the viewports of the Titan’s bridge. General Gorn stood at his other shoulder, gaunt face utterly still above the buckled collar of his environment suit.

Susada ran a hand around the neck seals of his own suit. The viral agents which had killed Tallarn still persisted in air and soil, and it would take hundreds – perhaps thousands? – of years before a human could breathe openly here again.

He had not thought that his return home would be like this, but then how could he have? In all the decades of war across the stars, he had always thought that he would never see the world of his birth again. On Vessos and Tagia Prime during the Great Crusade, and on Caldrin after the Warmaster turned, and on a dozen lesser fronts, he had been certain that death would pull him aside into cold oblivion. But he had lived, and now returned to find that Tallarn was no more.

The deck swayed beneath his feet, and the god-machine halted.

Susada glanced at the unmoving forms of the princeps and the twin moderati. The three were wired into their thrones. Black crystal visors covered their faces, apparently to hide their eyes from others. He had never seen the custom in other Titan Legions. He did not like it, but he did not know why.

‘What is it?’ Susada asked after a few seconds. ‘Why have we halted?’

Spools of punched parchment unwound slowly from the command consoles.

It was Kalikgol who spoke. ‘Look.’

The White Scar was staring out through the armourglass of the Titan's eye, his own pupils as black pinpricks in grey irises. Susada followed the Space Marine's gaze, and saw.

The cloud had cleared from a patch on the ground, peeled back by a tug of the wind.

Shapes emerged from the yellow murk. For a second, he was reminded of the backs of sea creatures breaking the surface of an ocean. Then he recognised what he was looking at.

Spirals of corrosion covered the closest tank's hull, snaking across the pitted metal. Its tracks lay beside and behind it, shed in the last moments before its destruction. A jagged-edged hole distorted the slope of the frontal armour. Its turret hatch was still sealed, but the barrel of the main gun was a splintered twig of blackened metal. He could see dust heaped within the gutted interior, opened up to the deadly elements.

Another tank emerged from the retreating cloud, the lines of its bulk softened by acidic decay. Beside it another smaller machine, seemingly unmarked apart from the smooth hole passing cleanly through its turret from one side to the other – a clean bullet wound through a condemned man's skull. More wrecks appeared, crowded together, or isolated in drifts of their own debris. He recognised dozens of patterns at a single glance, though he saw many that he had never seen before. There were the great slab-hulls of Storm Hammers resting beside the carcasses of legionary Predators and workhorse Executioners. Amidst the wreckage, the crumpled forms of battle automata spread in tangles of machine limbs. One of the larger walkers seemed almost intact, its fire-scoured carapace unmarked and its piston-clamp fists locked onto the broken hull of a Sicaran, seemingly frozen in the act of tearing the dead tank apart.

The cloud continued to roll away, and the carpet of dead metal grew beneath the feet of the Titan.

'The plains of Khedive,' muttered Kalikgol. Susada heard General Gorn take a slow breath, but he said nothing.

Khedive, Susada thought. *I must have stood almost on this very spot…*

There had been rain in the air that day – warm rain blown in from the south, so that the grasslands swayed and flowed like the tides of the sea. He had stood beside the other men of his regiment, their heads turned to the heavens, watching as the transports dropped through the wet sky towards them. It had been the last time that he had been on the surface of Tallarn, the last time he had breathed its air. Now, he could never do either again.

'What is this?' he asked at last, his voice dry in his throat. He looked at Gorn, but the general's scarred face had become a fixed mask, his eyes distant.

'This?' said Kalikgol, turning his grey gaze on Susada for a long moment.

Then the White Scar turned back to the plain of machine carcasses. It spread all the way to the horizon.

‘This is victory,’ he said.

EXECUTIONER

The death of Tallarn

‘War is the death of rationality. Only in retrospect do events seem driven by choice and judgement. Those who fight rarely know why they fight, and those that command them rarely see clearly enough to make any true choices besides saying “we fight them here because this is where we are”.’

– Aedolus, savant-militant to the Imperial court

‘Destruction is not obliteration. When we destroy we create. Break a sheet of glass and you create sharp edges.’

– Aphorism of the Gobinal Blade clans, Terra (age unknown)

‘Speak to me of the kingdoms we made amongst the stars.
No, we will not speak of those dead places,
Of their coverings of night, and their quieted songs.
Speak to me of the greatness which was ours.
No, we will not speak of dry teeth rattling in dead mouths.
Speak to me of the peace that will be ours again.
No, we will not speak of the silence that will come.’

– *Song of Lament at Fall of Night*, Tallarn (later era)

The remakers of Tallarn arrived like driftwood carried on a breaking wave. A thousand ships tumbling into space from nowhere: first one, spinning end over end, then a second and then hundreds. They rolled in the starlight, ectoplasm melting from their black iron hulls. All were warships of the IV Legion, the Iron Warriors. They were not graceful galleons of war, but slab-hulled world breakers, armoured in pitted plates, their flanks and spines nests for guns and launch bays.

The Iron Blood *arrived last, thrusters firing down the length of its hull as soon as it tasted real space. The great ship shook as it forced itself into a controlled arc of flight, its superstructure shuddering, engine vents glowing white with heat. It ploughed a path through its scattered fleet. Some of the smaller ships managed to regain enough control to move out of its path, but not all could escape.*

The Purity of Fire *spiralled into the* Iron Blood*'s path. The great battle-barge's prow hit the torpedo destroyer like a hammer, and the smaller ship burst into ragged chunks, its plasma reactor rupturing in a sphere of blue-hot matter. The* Iron Blood *broke through the wreckage, its armour glowing briefly under the fire's touch. It slid to stillness and lay in the darkness, its engines dimming like the eyes of a tired man. Slowly, the scattered ships formed around it.*

Signals began to crawl amongst the ships, orders and demands for data beginning to flow. Order returned to the fleet. Sensors rolled across the void, searching, judging.

In the star-pricked sphere of space one star burned brighter than all the rest. At this range the naked eye saw it as a small glowing coin. Around that star its planets waited, unknowing of their future, sleeping peacefully in the cold wrapping of space.

Slowly, like a great beast rising from sleep, the fleet turned its prows towards the star and a thousand ships went to murder a civilisation.

ONE

Forgotten weapons
Heaven’s tears
Silence

Lieutenant Tahirah – officer commanding First Squadron, Amaranth Company, Jurnian 701st Armoured – swore as the tank braked sharply. She was still swearing as she came off the empty gun mount and spun through the air. The ground hit her hard as she tried to turn her fall into a roll. She skidded across the floor in a tangle of arms and legs, hit the tarpaulin-covered crates and stopped. The air thumped from her lungs. That stopped the swearing. She felt the cool rockcrete press against her cheek. A dull pain filled her chest. Her mouth was open; she could feel her lips and tongue flapping as she tried to breathe.

I must look like a fish, she thought.

The rest of the crew were laughing now, the sound blending with the idle growl of the tank’s engine. The Mars-pattern chassis was grumbling where it stood a few paces away. Still in its factory grey, it did not look like a battle tank. Where the turret should have been was only a greased collar, and an opening into the chassis’s guts. Hull and sponson gun mounts were just empty slots. She could see the gunner girl Genji grinning out at her from where the forward hull weapon should be. Lachlan sat on the tank’s right sponson, Makis and Vail on the top of the hull, legs dangling into the machine’s open guts.

‘Inspecting the floor, Tah?’ The voice was high-pitched, almost boyish. Udo. It would be Udo. They all laughed some more. Terra, it was not even a good joke.

‘Just trying... to escape... your company.’

They laughed, and she breathed quietly.

The fall was her fault really. Udo could not drive to save his life, and the top of the gun mount had been a stupid place to sit for the ride. Even so she had to try very, very hard not to consider standing up and shooting Udo in the face. She pushed herself to her knees as a pathetic sip of air reached her lungs. She stood up, picked up her cap and jammed it back on her head. She was tall for a machine rider, but would have been short for an infantry officer. Wiry, warm-skinned and sharp-faced, she had a smile that she thought showed too many teeth, and her grey-and-greens always looked baggy, no matter their size.

She glanced away from the tank, as much to hide the fact that she had still not got her breath as to take the sight in. Behind the idling vehicle the chamber

extended away, a vast rockcrete cavern lit by harsh light. Now that she was not riding on the tank she noticed how the sound of the engine had filled the space with echoes. The floor was a patina of oil stains and gouge marks from heavy tracks. A fine gritty layer of dust covered everything, and there was a cool, slightly musty smell, which betrayed that the ventilation system had not been active for some time. Somewhere above them, separated by layers of rock, plascrete and steel, was the Sapphire City, bustling with life while beneath it a warren of military shelters lay all but empty.

It was not actually empty, of course: two regiments and a few other stranded units lived in the upper sections. Then there were the stores, supplies for campaigns that had most likely ended long ago, all rusting and decaying in silence. Even in caverns like this one, there were crates stacked against the walls, and big blocky shapes under regulation green tarps. Despite that, an entire armoured regiment, perhaps two, could have vanished into the remaining space.

And there were more shelters, ten more in this complex alone, and more complexes all across Tallarn. Space enough for a star-cluster-breaking army to gather.

Not any more, thought Tahirah. She had never really bothered with the unoccupied parts of the underground shelter until now. Three damned years and she had never thought to look around.

The rest of them had, of course. She had the feeling that Makis and Genji knew far more about the complex than was healthy, but then what else was there to do? It was Makis who had found the chamber, and suggested taking one of the incomplete machines for a joyride. At least that was how it had seemed. Tahirah had a feeling that this was not the first time her crew had passed the time this way, just the first time they had asked her along.

Tahirah and the rest of the Jurnian 701st had been in holding condition – pre-deployment – on Tallarn for twenty-seven Solar months. After six months they had gone through every drill imaginable just to try and bleed off some of the tension running through the unit. There had been fights, both amongst the crews of the 701st, and with the Chalcisorian 1002nd Mechanised who shared the complex. There had been floggings. It had made no difference. They were all clamped down too tight waiting for a war that seemed to have forgotten that they were waiting.

Then the news had come. The Imperium was at war with itself. Horus, Warmaster of the Great Crusade, had turned upon the Emperor and half the fighting power of the Imperium had turned with him. Some had doubted that it was true, as though the lack of immediate sound and fury denied the possibility of Horus’s treachery. And still Tahirah’s unit had remained without orders, without a ship to carry them to a front, without a war that wanted them.

Tahirah turned and saw Makis leaning down into the tank's open turret ring just behind the driver's position.

'Get out of the seat, Udo,' he said, his voice low and measured.

'Why? Can't I make a mistake while I learn?'

She could not see Udo but the whiny bastard's voice was more distinctive than his ratty face.

Makis scratched the grey stubble on his chin, and gave a small shake of his head. Lachlan caught her eye from where he sat on the top of the right sponson. He tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

'Just get out,' said Makis.

Udo's head popped out of the turret collar, his spot-covered scalp gleaming in the light. He reached up for someone to give him a hand. No one did. After a second he pulled himself up, his faced pinched with the effort. The kid was all pale skin and ribs under his grey-and-green fatigues.

'I didn't hit anything,' Udo protested as he stood on the upper hull.

Makis said nothing, but swung down into the driver's seat.

'Oh. You were trying to avoid hitting anything?' said Vail. 'Sorry, I thought you were being reckless. I guess incompetent is better.'

'It was funny.' Udo's thin face was pinched and red. 'You guys laughed.'

'Udo.' Vail had turned his head, a frown bunching above his black eyes. 'Shut up.'

'I didn't hit anything,' mumbled Udo again as he sat down, his legs hanging into the turret collar, and he shot a sour look at Vail. The tattooed loader closed his eyes as if he were catching up on some sleep. Udo flushed pink with anger.

Udo. She should do something about Udo. Her crew was doing what small groups of bored people that spent too much time with each other did: they found an outlet for their frustration. She should have done something about it months ago. She had always got results from her crews without using the hard methods of other officers. It was getting to her – the waiting and not knowing. She bit her lip as she watched Udo glance again at Vail, then down into the tank where Makis settled into the driver's seat. She *really* should have done something months ago. Her skills were slipping. She ran a hand through her close-cropped hair.

She *would* do something.

Udo gave Vail another glance, then spat onto the tank's hull. The saliva drooled down the grey-sprayed metal.

Trouble was, the little tick was so easy to dislike.

'Boss?' Lachlan's voice cut through her thoughts and she blinked, realising that he had got off the tank and was standing just a couple of paces away. He wore a green vest, and his combat trousers were an ochre-and-grey tiger pattern that was

not Jurnian issue. He held up an open pack of lho-sticks. Tahirah nodded and he tossed her the packet.

‘Thanks,’ she said as she lit up, and handed the pack back. Lachlan nodded at the tank chassis, as the engine gunned and a fresh plume of exhaust boiled towards the roof.

‘You ready for another spin, boss?’

‘Huh?’ She looked at the tank. ‘Yeah, sure, in a minute.’

She turned to the tarpaulin-covered shapes that she had rolled into when she came off the tank. The edge of one of the tarps was loose, and she could see rust-spotted metal beneath. She lifted the edge of the heavy fabric and flicked it back. The vehicles underneath were small, barely a third of the size of the Mars chassis that Udo had nearly crashed. They were stacked in threes, one on top of another, in metal frames.

‘You seen this stuff?’ said Tahirah, as her eyes moved across the rust blooms and stencilled numbers.

‘What are they?’ Lachlan stepped next to her.

‘Scout cars, I guess. Never seen this pattern before.’ Tahirah pointed her lho-stick at the small mount jutting from the front of one of the vehicles. ‘That looks like it should take a lascannon.’

Lachlan nodded and bent down next to the bottom vehicle in the stack. He ran his hand over the projecting wheel mount. It came up black with dust-covered grease.

‘Never been stripped of the manufactorum grease. They must have come in and been stuck here before they could get to the poor bastards who were supposed to ride them.’ He ran a thumbnail across a patch of rust, and came away with a flake of brown-red metal the size of an aquila coin. ‘Don’t think they will ever make it.’

‘I know how it feels,’ she said, and let out a long breath. ‘Come on, let’s get back to the upper levels.’ She walked back to the waiting tank, swung herself up onto the upper hull and dropped herself onto the turret collar opposite Udo. Lachlan followed. The engine growled from idle, and the tank clanked around. She glanced at Udo and saw his mouth start to open.

‘No, Udo. You can’t drive.’

Akil Sulan waited in silence until Jalen’s footsteps had receded across the tiled platform. For a long moment he watched the letters scroll across the data-slate in his hand before he shut it down and slipped it into his pocket. Akil took another slow breath, tasting the smell of the Sapphire City as it settled under the failing light. The scent of dust blending with the sea wind filled his mouth and nose. He liked this time of evening: the heat of the day rubbing against the cool of lengthening shadows, the scent of water as the warm stones of the streets were

washed of dust, the thin plumes of cooking smoke rising from the tangle of roofs. It was as though the city itself was breathing out.

He took another slow breath, allowing it to hold him for a second suspended between moments. The sky was a cobalt-blue vault, edged by the golden pink of the sun's retreat. The city dropped away from the edge of the balcony in irregular tiers, and the shadow-cut valleys of streets, sliding down until it met the flat lands of the coast and delta and its stone roofs gave way to the crystal of agri-domes that extended to meet the sea. Most of the city was a tangle of flat-roofed buildings, but it was the towers that drew the eye. There were hundreds of them, some small and weathered, others seeming to scrape the sky. All were stone, but stone of a thousand textures and colours. The black tower of Asil sparkled with flecks of crystal, while the Spire of Nema looked like a spiralled horn of bone. Akil smiled for a second, as only a man who owned much of what he saw could.

The Sapphire City: a jewel amongst Tallarn's many great cities. His city.

He leaned on the stone balustrade, and looked down at his hand. The skin looked older somehow: how had that happened? How had so much time and responsibility piled upon him?

He brought his hands up, running them across the smooth skin of his face and then back through his greying hair. It was an old gesture, imitating splashing water across the face at the end of a day of toil. His daughters had picked up the gesture almost before they could talk. The thought of them laughing as they copied him briefly brought the smile back to his lips.

The wind rose and the smile faded.

He turned and walked away from the balustrade, tapping the data-slate in his pocket as he walked down the steps to the narrow streets below. His clothes were far poorer than those he normally wore. Those who knew him would be shocked to see him dressed in the worn black and purple robe so common amongst the toiling classes. He liked the simple clothes, though; they were comfortable and he enjoyed the frisson of anonymity when he walked through the streets of the Sapphire City as the darkness gathered in the recesses. People passed him, a few raised their hands and muttered him good fortune, but none spared him more than a glance. He seemed just another man walking home at the end of the day, with nothing but food and the promise of sleep on his mind.

He had grown up around these streets, had run across the rooftops and climbed the fruit vines that crawled over the walls of the old buildings. He had never been poor but riches were far in the future. Life had not always been pleasant then, but it had been simpler.

He missed that simplicity. He missed its clarity. He liked returning to the streets, the comforting feel of the worn stones beneath his feet, the mingled smell of cooking meat and flower tobacco softening the stench of stagnant drains. Most

of all he enjoyed the difference in how people looked at him, or failed to look at him, when he was not surrounded by life wards, wound in suitably exotic fabrics and trailed by aides. He enjoyed not being Akil Sulan for a while.

Tallarn is dying a slow death. The thought rose in his mind as he walked through the deepening shadows. Without the supplies and troops of the Great Crusade passing through the planet it would revert back to what it had been in the time of his grandfather: a backwater planet of little consequence. It might take a hundred years but it would happen. He would be dead himself by that time, but his daughters would not be. The twin girls were few years old, all smiles and careless laughter. They needed a future.

A cry shook him from his thoughts. He stopped. The cry came again, clear and sharp. He could hear the sound of feet scrabbling on stone from around a corner a few paces ahead. Akil was moving before another thought passed through his mind. His blade was in his hand as he came around the corner. The leatherbound hilt of the knife felt familiar and warm in his grip. He remembered his grandfather smiling as he had given it to him. Curved and double-edged, every man and woman on Tallarn carried a knife like this.

Akil turned the corner. The street beyond was narrow, the buildings to either side pressing close to pinch off the failing light. There were two of them, one a mound of flesh and muscle, the other thin and gangling. A third figure lay huddled on the ground. In the low light the men looked like blurred silhouettes, bodies and limbs. One of them lashed a kick into the figure on the ground. A cry cracked the air again.

‘Give us the coin, old man,’ said the thinner of the two. Akil was three paces away. The big man turned. Akil had the impression of a wide face and saw the glitter of an eye as it fastened onto him. The big man opened his mouth to shout, his hand moving towards his own knife.

‘If you want to know a people’s character, look at their weapons,’ his grandfather had said, *‘and we of Tallarn are children of the knife.’*

The big man’s blade lashed out, its edge a twilight glitter. Akil ducked under the blow and his own knife flicked across the man’s thigh. The man yelled. Akil came up and sliced across his knife-arm above the elbow.

The man’s blade fell from his fingers, blood streaming black down his slack arm. He looked around for his friend but the thinner man was already running. Akil took a pace back and met his foe’s eyes. The man hesitated. Akil brought his own knife up slowly so that it caught the light. Then the man nodded and limped away, trailing a line of dark drops on the stones of the street.

Akil watched him go and wiped and sheathed his blade. He looked to the figure on the ground. A worn face looked up at him as he bent down, old, with dust worked into the creases and framed by grey hair and beard.

‘Can you stand?’ asked Akil.

The old man grimaced, shifted and nodded.

‘Thank you, honoured worthy,’ said the old man. Akil could hear the age and lack of teeth in the man’s speech, but the words almost made him smile. ‘Honoured worthy’ was a form of address already antiquated before compliance. Akil noticed the grey folded cloth of the man’s clothes, frayed and stained with sweat and dust. The man was a rustic from one of Tallarn’s less developed settlements.

‘Did they take anything?’ asked Akil as he helped him up.

‘No, honoured worthy.’ The old man steadied himself on Akil, and took a shuddering breath. ‘The stars smile on your kindness.’

‘Here.’ Akil took a handful of trade markers from his pocket and held them out.

‘No, no.’ The old man shook his head and pushed Akil’s hand away. ‘I cannot take twice from your kindness.’

Akil held his hand out again, but the man shook his head and stepped away. ‘You have given more than enough. Fortune’s gifts rain on you.’ The man began to shuffle away. Akil moved to help him but the old man shook his head again.

Akil could sense the man’s desire to be away from this silent street. He glanced around. The darkness was almost complete. He needed to be off the streets himself.

‘I know where I am going.’ The man gave a toothless smile and nodded. ‘It is not far.’

Akil nodded back and was about to say something, but the man was already shuffling around the corner.

For a second Akil did not move. Something in the exchange did not fit. He turned and took a step down the street, his hand unconsciously brushing his pocket.

He went still. The pocket was empty, the data-slate gone. Cold dread spread through him. He checked his other pockets, and then the street.

Nothing.

He began to run in the direction the old man had gone, icy panic surging in his veins. He turned the corner. The wider street extended away into the gloom, silent and empty apart from scraps of rubbish dancing in the breeze.

‘*You have given more than enough,*’ the old man had said. Akil took another step, half thinking of running through the streets looking for the old man. He stopped. He would not find the old thief. The twilit alleys of the Sapphire City could swallow someone in a few swift paces; there were a dozen different ways the man could have gone from here.

He took a deep breath and tried to steady his thoughts and pulse. He would have to–

A flash in the sky suddenly bleached the street white. Akil raised his hands to shield his eyes. For a second he could see the veins in his eyelids.

He looked up. The stars were falling, breaking apart into sprays of sparks, tumbling across the night sky.

Fireworks, he thought. *An unplanned celebration. A meteor shower…*

Sirens began to scream. First one in the distance, then another, then another until the blaring chorus echoed all around. He could see doors and windows opening, people looking out. Somewhere deep inside him possibilities and fears combined. He thought of his daughters, sleeping in the manse on the other side of the city. People were filling the street now, pouring from doorways. Most froze as they emerged, their eyes locked upon the sky, their mouths moving, their words lost as the sirens wailed.

Akil started to move, a few slow steps at first. Then he began to stride, shoving people out of his way. Then he was running.

Above him the heavens wept tears of fire.

The metal was cool against Brel's forehead. He kept his eyes closed, allowing the headache to bleed out of his skin into the rim of the turret hatch. Somewhere outside the tank's hull he could hear raised voices. He ignored them. A lot of crews did not like spending more time in their vehicles than necessary, but Brel found the presence of his machine peaceful. *Silence* he had named her, long ago in the aftermath of a battle that he was not sure anyone on Tallarn actually remembered. Whether fired up, or engine cold as she was now, she was his place, his realm, where everything lined up as it should. When the headaches came, it was the only place he wanted to be.

The voices were getting louder, angry words filtering in through the open hatch above him.

Not now, he thought. Not while the headache was drumming through his skull. He let out a breath and tried to shut out the sound of the voices.

'You gotta pay,' said a female voice, high-pitched, spite whining at the edges. He knew the voice. It was Jallinika, of course.

'I can't,' said another voice, male, pleading, nasal. 'I just can't. Look–' The man's voice cut off with a grunt.

'There's more, lieutenant, *sir*,' said Jallinika. Brel could tell that she was enjoying what was going on. 'All the pain you want, just keep saying you can't pay.'

Another voice spoke, male, growling like the sea grinding pebbles against a cliff, too low for Brel to pick out words. It didn't matter; he did not need to

understand Calsuriz to recognise his voice. The big driver would be doing the muscle work, of course.

A half-spluttered cry reached through the hatch. Broken teeth, most likely. Brel screwed his eyes more tightly shut. He just wanted them to shut up. The headache was a white ball in his forehead, pressing against the back of his eyes.

‘So what are you going to say now, lieutenant, *sir*?’ drawled Jallinika, and Brel could hear her smiling.

‘I can... I–’

There was a loud sharp cry, and something hit the outside of the machine’s hull. For a second there was silence, then Calsuriz growled, and weeping mingled with wet, clotted breathing.

Enough, thought Brel. The pain in his head was sun bright. He opened his eyes and blinked at the blue and pink smears dancing in front of his eyes. He reached up, put his hands either side of the circular hatch, and pulled himself out in a single clean movement. They looked up at him as he jumped down to the track guard and then to the floor. Hundreds of silent tanks extended away in every direction, their hulls wrapped in dust. Every hundred metres a lumen globe diluted the gloom with urine-yellow light.

Brel looked down at the man curled on the floor. Blood had splattered the ground. The man’s mouth and nose were leaking red between his fingers. Brel noted the braided rank cords dangling from the shoulders of his Chalcisorian 1002nd uniform.

‘That’s enough,’ said Brel. His mouth felt dry, and the sun was still burning on the inside of his head. Brel knew that he must look like he had just been scraped from a machine tread. He was bare to the waist, his thin frame hunched from half a life crouched inside a Vanquisher’s turret. Dust and machine grease covered him, blurring the twists of long-healed wounds and smearing the edges of tattooed hawks and grinning skulls.

He licked his lips, and looked up at Calsuriz. The big man dropped his eyes and rubbed his jaw. Jallinika began to say something, but Brel turned his head to look at her. She took a step back, hands low and open, placating. The crater scars across her thin face and arms looked like small studs of shadow on her pale skin. Brel looked back to the lieutenant whimpering on the floor, stepped forward and crouched down. He recognised the man now: Salamo, commander of Twelfth Squadron, Leopard Company.

‘It’s Salamo, right?’ said Brel.

Salamo looked up. Blood covered the lower half of his face. His nose was a flattened mess and he was breathing between splinters of teeth. One of his augmetic eyes had shattered. He breathed hard, nodded.

Brel gave him a smile, trying not to let the pain in his head sour the expression. ‘The issue, Lieutenant Salamo, is that you seem to not understand the nature of a debt.’ Brel paused, blinked as the pain shifted its centre in his skull. ‘I did not take your debt marker, but unfortunately it is me that you owe. So before we go on I want to know what you owe and if you can pay.’

Behind him Jallinika began to make a noise. Brel raised a hand. She went silent. He smiled again at Salamo. The man shifted, and sucked air through his broken teeth.

‘Sixty... five,’ said Salamo, heaving a wet breath between the words.

‘Sixty-five?’ said Brel. He was trying hard not to clamp his eyes shut against the pain in his head. It had not been this bad for a while, not since Ycanus. He looked around at Jallinika. ‘You did this for sixty-five?’

‘He–’ She began to speak again, but Brel raised a finger. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

‘Can you pay?’ he said to Salamo.

‘No,’ gulped the man.

Brel nodded, his eyes still closed. Sixty-five was not a huge debt, but most of those that came to him usually had a problem that meant that the normal scales of fortune did not apply.

Brel and his crew had been on Tallarn for almost a decade now, left behind when the rest of their regiment had moved on and left them still bleeding into bandages and muttering in fever dreams. For a decade he had waited for the war to call him back. He had watched as Tallarn’s role as staging hub for the forces of the Great Crusade faded in importance. The millions that filled the shelter complexes had dwindled to a trickle. The ships that had lit the night sky with false stars had left and not returned. Still Brel and his crew had remained, forgotten warriors in a forgotten land. They found that there was a place for them on Tallarn.

Amongst the billions of rounds of ammunition and mouldering stores, there were things that soldiers would pay for: stimms, pain suppressors, better food. Things to conjure dreams or gift forgetfulness. After a while they had enough money to supply almost anything that the soldiers could wish for. They had kept it quiet and efficient, and the war had never returned. Even when word came that the Imperium was apparently at war with itself, Brel did not worry – he and his crew would never go back, not now.

He opened his eyes. Salamo was looking up at him, waiting. Brel gave a resigned smile and nodded.

‘Okay,’ said Brel in a soft voice. ‘Okay.’ He reached out and hooked his arm gently under Salamo’s, and helped him to his feet. The Chalcisorian lieutenant

rubbed the back of a hand across his bloody mouth. He glanced up at Brel, the one intact augmetic eye glowing green.

‘I will get you the money,’ lisped Salamo through a clot of spit and blood. ‘And I won’t say anything.’

Brel smiled again, and the movement sent fresh lines of pain across his scalp.

‘Okay,’ he said, and patted Salamo’s shoulder. ‘Okay.’

Salamo tried to smile back but his mashed face could not manage it. He turned to walk away.

Brel broke Salamo’s neck in one quick movement, and lowered the body to the ground. He closed his eyes again when it was done and let himself slump against *Silence*’s track guard. His ears were ringing. That was new.

‘Get rid of the body. Dump it in a lower cache chamber, and make it look like he fell off a ladder or something.’

The ringing was a piercing shriek now. Jallinika and Calsuriz said nothing. Brel forced his eyes open and looked around. His driver and gunner were standing staring up at the gloom hiding the arched roof. Brel was about to say something when Jallinika turned and looked at him.

‘What *is* that?’ she shouted.

Brel blinked, then shook his head. The wailing shriek pulsed as he moved, not inside his head but all around him. Brel had seen a lot of war fronts, had heard ships scream as part of their hull was breached, and run for dugouts as the bombs fell. The sound was an alarm, but like none he had ever heard. It was no alert, no muster call; it seemed new, as though it was a scream cutting into reality from a forgotten nightmare. The pain in his head was so strong that his vision blurred.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, but the words were lost as the alarm shrieked louder.

The first shot of the Battle of Tallarn was fired in space. It was fired from the edge of the planet's monitor range from the heavy cruiser Hammerfall. *The nova shell hit the northern polar orbital defence station while its systems were still asleep. The station vanished. Harsh blue light lit the northern face of Tallarn, and for an instant it burned brighter than the sun. A fraction of a second later the shell's secondary payload activated. The graviton charge sucked in the expanding sphere of plasma and dragged the station's weapon platforms into its crushing embrace. Curtains of aurora light danced across the northern plains of Kadir as the graviton detonation warred with Tallarn's magnetic fields. In the polar capital of Ormas people crowded the upper surfaces of the city dome to see the night sky dance.*

The orbital defence network began to wake. Auspex scans cut into space, looking for targets. They did not have to look hard. Hundreds of ships enclosed Tallarn in a shrinking sphere.

The planet's defences began to fire. Torpedoes slid from launch tubes. Turbo-lasers fired, running their capacitors dry as they drew networks of light across the darkness. Some shots found their mark.

Three torpedoes caught the macro-transporter Kraetos *and burrowed through three deck layers before detonating. Turbo-lasers caught the* Retribution of Thunder *as its void shields hit a ring of orbital debris. The beams of energy sliced the ship's bridge from its bulk and left it drifting. But the resistance could not last.*

Two more nova shells fired from the Iron Warriors fleet destroyed the equatorial and southern polar stations. Squadrons of destroyers slipped into high orbit and launched spreads of torpedoes. The warheads slid onto their own orbital arcs to hit the remaining weapon platforms. New constellations blinked into existence in the skies of Tallarn.

There were few ships to defend the system. A squadron of defence monitors, their responses dulled by years of inactivity, tried to intercept some of the enemy ships. They died for their effort. Las-fire cut their hulls into chunks, and then macro-cannon salvos hammered the remains into scraps of metal and burning gas.

One ship alone tried to run. The Light of Inwit *was an Imperial Fists strike vessel. She paused for a second as her communications officer tried to raise Marshal Lycus on Tallarn's surface. The only reply was static. Her shipmaster did not hesitate. Word of the attack needed to reach others. The* Light of Inwit *turned its prow to the blackness of the system edge and burned its engines until they were white with heat.*

She nearly made it. Iron Warriors gunships accelerated in her wake, reaching after her with stitched lines of explosions. Clouds of debris and energy buffeted her void shields, but she kept running. More Iron Warriors ships slipped from behind Tallarn's outer moon. They had been waiting to see if any of the defenders would run, and they were ready. Ten destroyers launched a net of torpedoes. The Light of Inwit *twisted, spiralling as it tried to weave a course through the web of warheads. A single torpedo clipped its upper hull and exploded. The vessel veered, its hull glowing with pinprick fires. The second torpedo hit it amidships and tore a chunk of hot metal from its flank. The Iron Warriors moved in with lazy confidence. Spinning without control, the* Light of Inwit *fired a single salvo as if shouting defiance. The Iron Warriors guns opened it from prow to stern.*

In the skies above Tallarn, heavy IV Legion ships settled into orbit. Grand cruisers, battle-barges, siege barques and weapon haulers plated the heavens in dull iron. Bombardment cannons slid from their bellies and rotated towards the surface. A few turned so that their prow torpedo tubes faced down towards the target zones, hanging like daggers.

On the ground, Tallarn's defences began to shout defiance at the sky. Laser platforms and missile silos threw ship-cracking payloads towards the orbiting vessels. The Iron Warriors fired in return.

For those looking up from the night side of Tallarn the bombardment appeared as a shower of falling stars. In the clear skies of the south, the falling warheads winked like golden coins scattered in the sun. Hundreds of bombs and torpedoes fell. After their initial launch they needed no propulsion; Tallarn's own gravity drew them to it. The warheads broke apart as they descended. They shed their ceramite armour first, sloughing it off like a cocoon to reveal polished metal beneath. The next layer simply fragmented seconds later, dumping the first dose of viral agents into the upper air currents. Beneath this, hundreds of winged bomblets nestled like insect young clinging to their mother. This layer released three hundred metres above the ground. The bomblets began to tumble like seeds, spraying atomised viral agents as they spun.

Finally, the core of each warhead hit the ground like a bullet, punching through rock and soil before exploding. Clouds of earth and debris burst into the air. Beneath the earth, the virus began to spread through the soil and into the water table.

The first casualties were those closest to the ground bursts. In the Crescent City, a warhead hit one of the main arterial routes through the outskirts. The road was dense with people and vehicles, scrambling to reach the entrances of the shelters beneath the city. As the explosive cloud settled people began to fall, blood running from their eyes. Within seconds the flesh of those within the initial blast had begun to fall from their bones in blood-slimed ribbons.

Those that were further away lived a little longer. The mist of viral agents in the air mixed with the wind as it blew across Tallarn. People began to fall. They fell trying to get to shelter. They fell in their homes as the killing air seeped through the cracks in the walls. They fell looking up at the sky. Outside the cities the virus scythed through the lush agri-belts and jungle regions. Forests became tatters of toxic slime hanging from the dead skeletons of trees. The slick bones of cattle floated in pools of black filth. Flocks of birds fell from the air in a rain of putrefying flesh and feathers.

Within five minutes of the first impacts the casualties in the major cities numbered almost a million. Within ten minutes they were over ten million. Within an hour the living population on the surface of Tallarn was negligible.

A few survived in isolated places far away from the impact sites. They would die in the following days. Within three days there was no measurable life on the surface.

The last person to die in the attack was a soldier attached to one of the northern tundra bases. His name was Rahim. Caught in an armoured vehicle far from the cities, he drove in search of other military personnel until his fuel ran out. His air supply failed two hours later.

Sealed in shelters far beneath the ground, the survivors of Tallarn waited. Many were soldiers, the remnants of regiments never shipped out to the Great Crusade. Beside them were a lucky few, civilians who had known of the shelters and reached them in time. Sipping recycled water, breathing processed air, they listened as silence settled across the surface of Tallarn like a shroud.

TWO

The hell above
Machine kill
Vanquisher

‘You have to be kidding me,’ muttered Jallinika. Brel shot her a look, and she shrugged. They stood in the shelter’s primary dispersal area, just one of many clusters waiting to hear what would happen next. The officer standing on the turret top looked like he was about to be sick. His skin was pale and his eyes were wide and glassy, as though he had been staring at the world around him hoping that he was about to wake up. Brel remembered that look: it was the look of someone who had just found out what it felt like to be part of history.

‘The reconnaissance is going to be light – squadron strength.’ The officer, a Jurnian captain by his uniform, was pointedly not looking at the men and women clustered around the tracks of the tank he was standing on. He glanced down at a spool of parchment in his right hand, tried to smooth it out, failed and almost dropped it.

‘Terra,’ hissed Jallinika, and shook her head. Brel kept his eyes on the officer.

This was it: the calculation of fate, the roll of the dice. If there had been any gods left to pray to, Brel would have asked them to make sure that he remained forgotten. He had been ordered to report to this Jurnian captain – someone had actually found him and given him the order, and that could only mean bad things. Beside him, the Jurnian crews he had been lumped with shifted as they waited for the captain to find his voice. Brel glanced around the waiting circle, noticing the expressions on their faces. Some looked nervous, some numb. A few even looked excited.

Then his eyes found the others, the men and women in one-piece drab overalls without insignia or markings. They looked nothing like soldiers. They looked like refugees scraped together and stuffed into surplus uniforms. Brel gave a tired breath; he was suddenly certain how this was going to go.

‘Atmosphere on the surface is toxic so full seal protocols are to be enforced inside your machines.’ The officer paused, and licked his lips. Jallinika rolled her eyes and shook her head again, but he did not seem to notice. Brel was not surprised that the idiot was going through the full brief, top to bottom, like the drills, ignoring the fact that any idiot knew that any vehicle going out would have to be locked down and the crew skinned in enviro-suits. It, like the rest of the

briefing, was irrelevant. Everyone was just waiting for the one thing that mattered: who was going out.

After all, thought Brel, *they aren't going to answer the real question – why are we going out* now*?*

It had been seven weeks since the bombs fell, and after the shock had come the panic, then the numbness of reality settling into place. There had been suicides, and the demand for narcotics of any and all description had gone through the roof. Then there were the survivors, thousands of civilians from the city above who had managed to reach the complex before it was sealed. Broken people wearing stained clothes from lives that no longer existed, they clustered in the unused chambers.

For a few days the complex had simmered on the edge of insanity. Officers had clung to protocol like drowning men to fragments of a broken ship. There had been some summary executions to enforce discipline, and things had settled into a dazed rhythm after that, and the weeks had passed.

Now, something had changed.

'Each squadron will have a scout guide attached to them.' The captain nodded to the men and women in the drab overalls. 'They will be in light vehicles. They are all volunteers. They know the surface and will help you navigate.'

Brel was not surprised when Jallinika stifled a laugh. They were taking some of the civilian survivors out onto whatever was left of the surface of Tallarn. It was worse than pointless, it was idiotic.

'The purpose of the mission is to establish if there are any enemy forces on the surface and to identify them,' said the captain, reading from his notes. 'We have no surviving forces on the surface, so you are going to be our eyes.'

We don't even know who we are fighting, thought Brel. *A whole world dies and we are wondering who held the knife.*

'The battle disposition is as follows,' said the captain. Brel felt the coldness in his gut expand and squirm. 'First Squadron, you are heading east along the coastal road.'

A female lieutenant with a sharp face and baggy fatigues raised a hand. 'Number three machine is down in my squadron. Main armament won't light.'

The captain looked flustered, and glanced down at the parchment in his hand. Brel almost felt sorry for the guy. Almost.

'Yes,' stammered the captain. 'Yes, it's been accounted for. You have a replacement attached to your squadron.' The captain looked up. 'Sergeant Brel?'

Brel let out a breath and raised a hand. 'Sir,' he said in a flat voice.

'Your machine is attached to Lieutenant Tahirah's outfit.'

Brel nodded acknowledgement, and avoided the lieutenant's eye.

They were going out. After all this time war had found him again. Beside him Jallinika was whispering curses. Calsuriz and Selq were quiet. Brel felt nothing, as though the order had hollowed him out. The captain was still talking, but Brel was not hearing it. The world was the slow rumbling pulse of blood in his ears. The memory of Vandorus came to him again then, bubbling up, hot and vivid. Forests burning around him, the sound of rounds ringing on the hull, the bright instant the energy beam hit his machine and turned the world dark. And then all the rest came, one after another – all the battlefields, all the dead with their charred smiles. When the pain bloomed in his skull it was a relief, drowning memory in bright sensation.

‘My name is Akil.’

Brel looked up. The briefing had broken up around them.

A man stood in front of him. He was lean and handsome with dark eyes and hair. The drab overalls marked him as one of the civilians pulled together and given basic machine training so they could act as guides on the surface. It was worse than ridiculous.

The man called Akil, smiled. He looked like he was used to being in charge, and used to money too. He extended his hand in greeting.

‘I believe I am your scout,’ said the man.

Brel looked at Akil’s hand then turned away. Beside him Jallinika grunted in amusement, but Brel said nothing. Inside his head the fires of memory still danced and the dead were grinning at him in welcome.

This is not my world. This is not real. This cannot be real. The thoughts looped through Akil’s mind as the machines crawled through the corpse of the Sapphire City. He wanted to look away but his eyes had stayed fixed on the narrow slot of armourglass since they had emerged from the shelter.

Fog hung over his view like a curtain. There was no sun, just a diffuse yellow glow that seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes the fog thickened and they had to halt. In those moments he found his mind forming images in the shift and swirl beyond the armourglass. He would watch and wait until he could see a few metres, then start to drive again. Occasionally the fog would peel back and show him what it hid.

Buildings still stood, but they were empty shells. Wooden balconies, doors and window frames had collapsed and dissolved to run down the stone walls. Skins of iridescent moisture clung to the fallen glass of windows. He saw the dead, too. At first he had thought that they were heaps of mud or sewage. Then he had seen half-melted teeth grinning from the slime. He had stopped looking so closely after that.

The two-man scout vehicle he was driving was a low slab of welded metal with a raked front. It apparently had a name: *Talon*. He had driven and piloted many

different machines in his life, but nothing quite like *Talon*. Tracks ran across its front and up and over the top of its flanks. A sealed socket at the front waited for a weapon which had remained unfitted. When Akil had first seen it, the machine's hull had been a raw grey. Now slime mottled its surface.

Inside *Talon* the only noise was the engine and the suck and hiss of the air system. To Akil's ears it sounded like the beat of a dying man's heart. After a while he had found that he was waiting for every wheeze of air. He could not hear Rashne, but he knew that he was there, crouched in the small cargo space, hugging his knees and not looking at the armoured crystal viewports. Rashne was a soldier, a signal operator, but if it had not been for the uniform Akil would have thought him a boy. Rashne had looked outside only once. He had pressed his face against the glass as the fog rolled around them. He had seen, and stared for a minute before curling up in silence.

Both Akil and Rashne wore enviro-suits of thick rubberised material inside the vehicle, their eyes looking out of circular eyepieces, mouths connected to air bottles by tubes. *Talon* had tracks, like a battle tank, but no turret. The empty weapon socket was situated next to Akil's control rig. He was not sure if they did not trust him or simply did not have the correct weapon. The vehicle's controls were simple: two levers and two pedals. They had given him six hours' training. Now, grinding through the outskirts of the dead city, unable to see where he was going, linked to the rest of the squadron by a scratching vox, he wondered how they could ever have thought that was enough. Controlling the machine was like wrestling an iron herd beast, the controls responding either hesitantly or with a sudden surge of raw power.

They had been driving for hours. Akil had no idea where they were. He had been heading south, using the vehicle's compass. The major arterial road to the nearest settlements ran along the coast, and before the bombardment the journey to the city's edge would have taken no more than half an hour. They had been moving for six hours and still they had found no sign of any enemy. Occasionally he saw something that he thought he recognised. A building or statue would suddenly appear out of the fog for an instant and then fade again. Each time he had tried to figure out where they were, but failed. The entire squadron would come to a halt. He had convinced himself several times that the compass was wrong and that they were heading north, or going in circles.

He tried not to think too much, not to think about why this had happened, not to think about all the people he had seen crowding the streets as the alarms sounded. Not to think about his daughters in his house, far to the south.

They would have just been going to sleep, he thought, and then cut the thought away as quickly as it formed. He was not sure why he had volunteered for this. Anger was part of it, anger at what had been done to his world; guilt as well, but

he had an unpleasant feeling that more than anything it had been because he had wanted to look at the hell above ground and know that it was real. He knew now.

He blinked. The world outside had peeled back to show him a bare shore to the left of the road. The sea was the colour of a bruise and heaved with a thick slowness. Heaps of oozing matter lay along the tide line. It began to rain, greasy black drops spattering across the armourglass. He halted the machine, and turned to Rashne. The boy was looking back at him, eyes wide behind misted eyepieces, knees gathered to his chest. Akil nodded.

'Tell the others that we are on the eastern coast road.'

For a moment Rashne did not move. Then he unfolded and began to flick switches on the equipment that crowded the compartment. He plugged a lead from his suit's comms into the main bank, twirled a dial, depressed a switch and began to speak.

'*Lantern*, this is *Talon*.' A surge of static followed Rashne's voice, then a low hissing half-silence. '*Lantern*, this is *Talon*.' The static rose again, then faded back to a low moan. Rashne began twirling dials, saying the same phrase over again: '*Lantern*, this is *Talon*.' Akil could hear the boy's breath sucking at the end of each transmission.

'Rashne,' said Akil into his own vox. The boy did not answer but flicked and twirled the vox-controls, his voice now a pleading monotone. Akil turned his head to look out of his front view slit. Thick yellow fog pressed close against the glass.

'They aren't there.' Rashne's voice was low, as though he was talking to himself. Akil turned to look at him. The boy was slumped with his head resting on the vox-panel. 'They aren't there.'

Then he looked up, and Akil noticed the beads of moisture smeared across the inside of the boy's eye lenses.

'We are alone,' said Rashne, and Akil felt the world close around him like a cold hand.

Silence ground forwards through the murk, tatters of bio-sludge trailing from its tracks and the long barrels of its main gun. Slime and debris crunched and sucked under its tracks. Its exhausts coughed in the soup-thick air. *Silence* was a Vanquisher, a machine made to kill others of its kind, and it bore its purpose with the scarred arrogance of an old warrior. She had fought on Credence, and Arzentis IX, and taken damage on Fortuna. It had been that damage that had marooned her on Tallarn; her masters had moved on, leaving her to be repaired but never to rejoin them. Brel had never ridden *Silence* into battle, but he did not doubt her. They were alike, bred of the same substance and experience.

'Where the hell have they gone?' muttered Brel, looking at the screen of his auspex. Five minutes earlier the *Talon* had vanished from their screens, and now

the whole squadron was getting static when they tried to raise them on the vox.

‘Idiot was supposed to know this city,’ said Jallinika. ‘Now he is just gone.’

‘Quiet,’ said Brel, staring at the auspex screen. Shapes and colour washed across it. They had been four – the two Executioners, his own Vanquisher, and the scout machine. The green markers of the two Executioner hulls hardened and then blurred as if sinking back into the distortion. There was no sign of the scout. The scanner had been lousy with interference ever since they had left the shelter, but this was worse.

‘*Silence, this is Lantern,*’ Lieutenant Tahirah crackled in his ear.

He blinked. The inside of his suit lenses had fogged. The distortion buzzed across the auspex. He did not bother looking out of any of the periscope blocks. There was no point. If they could not see the scout on the screen then they would not be able to see it by staring at the fog outside, even with infra-vision.

‘*Damn it, Silence – respond*.’

‘This is *Silence*, go ahead,’ said Brel, his attention not leaving the screen. Something was itching at the edge of his senses. A green blizzard briefly blew across the auspex.

‘*Can you see anything?*’ asked Tahirah.

Brel was silent. Blood was pounding through his skull. Screams rode on the surge of his breathing. It was like it always had been. Like all the places where he had killed, and come out alive hoping never to go back. The blur of static boiled across the auspex, then dimmed. He felt like he was waiting for something.

Calmness spread through him, as soft and sudden as a light turning off.

It’s going to start again, he thought. *All of it, just like before*. He felt his body and mind fold over the feelings of panic, and slip into a calm rhythm. It was so familiar that it felt almost like coming home.

‘*Lantern*, this is *Silence*. I see nothing,’ he paused. He licked his lips and tapped Jallinika once on the right arm, an old command given without words. The breech of the main gun opened and swallowed a shell. Brel felt the *clunk* of it closing in his bones, another old sensation returned after so long. ‘But something is wrong, *Lantern*. Something is out there. We should light weapons.’

‘*What?*’ Tahirah’s voice was a disbelieving crackle. ‘*You can see nothing, but there is something out there?*’

‘Light your weapons. I don’t care if you have rank over me. Light your weapons.’

The pause lengthened into the squall of distortion.

‘*Lantern, this is Deathlight, what are your orders?*’ The voice was Hector, commander of the squadron’s number two machine. Hector was firm, but Brel could hear the tension in his question. The other crews would all be feeling what

he felt – the heavy, caged sensation, and the acid taste of adrenaline. They would all be feeling it, but no one outside *Silence* would know what it meant.

Beside him, Jallinika was murmuring something to herself. A prayer muttered to an outlawed god.

‘*All call signs.*’ Tahirah paused. ‘*Light your weapons.*’

The glass trembled against the side of Akil’s head. The engine was still running, of course. They needed it to power the air system. He shifted his head slightly. Behind him the vox-unit was still breathing static into the cabin. It sounded reassuring, like rain pattering on the roof at night. Rashne was weeping, the sound of the boy’s sobs cutting into and out of the internal vox. Akil listened but said nothing. They were lost. They were alone, and it was now just a matter of time until the engine ran out of fuel and the air stopped. He wondered if he would take off his suit and open the hatch before that point. At least that would be the end of everything, and an end he deserved. He thought of his daughters and whether they had survived.

The glass trembled against his skull again. He raised his head and put his hand to the glass. A low bass vibration met his touch, its note out of sync with the rumble of the vehicle’s engine, the sound of heavy tracks shaking the ground.

‘I hear something,’ said Akil quietly. Rashne sobbed again.

Akil keyed the internal vox and spoke more loudly. ‘Rash, I hear something.’ He looked around and saw that the boy had looked up at him, eyes wide behind misted glass. Akil nodded. ‘Can’t you hear it? They are out there, they are close.’ He paused. ‘Try the vox again.’

Rashne turned and began to flick switches.

‘Any call sign, respond if you can hear this. This is scout unit four, First Squadron, Amaranth Company, Seven Hundred and First.’

Akil shook his head, as if trying to shake the smile off. Relief and exhaustion flooded through him.

We are not alone.

He slumped forward, head resting on the armourglass he had been staring through for hours. His eyes flicked to the forward viewing slit. The fog had smothered them again, hiding the landscape behind yellow silt veils. He was about to turn to Rashne when he saw something move in the fog.

‘Rash,’ he said carefully, trying to keep his voice steady. ‘Are you getting anything coming through?’

‘No,’ said Rashne. Akil could almost see the boy grinning and shrugging. ‘But they are close, right?’

Akil kept his eyes steady on the view beyond the smeared glass. He felt very cold.

We are not alone. The thought rose in his mind, like a chilling echo of a misunderstood revelation.

‘That’s weird,’ said Rashne. Akil heard him flicking more switches. ‘There is something coming over the vox. Listen.’

Rashne raised the volume. After a second Akil heard what he meant: a low growl of noise rising and falling behind the wall of static. He listened more closely. The sound came and went, almost like the breaking of slow waves on a shore, or the beating of a heart.

‘Rash–’ he began to say, but then he saw it again. It surfaced from the fog, like a sea creature breaking the surface to breathe before diving out of sight. He had an impression of hard angles and dull, unpolished steel. It had been close as well, within a hundred metres.

He could hear the frame of the vehicle vibrating now.

‘Rash, shut the vox down,’ he said, panic rising in his voice.

‘What?’ said Rashne.

‘Shut it down.’

‘Why?’

Akil was not listening. He was thinking of when he had watched a sabre cat stalking prey in the equatorial forests, of the way it moved its head as it sniffed the air. He reached out slowly and flicked the engines off.

‘What are you doing?’ called Rashne.

‘Shut the v–’

They both heard it.

‘An engine,’ breathed Rashne. ‘It’s them, they’re here.’ The boy was reaching for the vox.

The tank broke from the fog in front of Akil’s eyes. Its hull was a raked slab of dull metal topped with a domed turret. Slime scattered in its wake as it ground forwards. Threads of red light reached through the fog, scattering as they swept and converged. The turret rotated as he watched, fixing him with the blank gaze of its weapon barrel. He felt with numb certainty that his next breath would be the last.

‘I am sorry,’ he whispered to himself.

The world vanished behind a sheet of white light.

‘Kill!’ shouted Lachlan. Tahirah winced as his voice roared from her headset. She felt sweat rolling down her skin. The temperature inside *Lantern* had spiked an instant after the weapon had fired. Inside her enviro-suit the hairs rose across her skin as the plasma destroyer began to recharge. The hull was shaking and bucking as it accelerated into the engagement. Engine noise vibrated through her head.

Crammed into the turret next to Lachlan, it felt like she was riding a boat in a stormy sea. All of the crew wore sealed suits of rubber and treated fabric.

Breathing air through a mask plugged into the tank's air supply, it felt as if she was drowning in the heat and the brain-numbing snarl of *Lantern*'s engine. She could barely see anything that was not directly in front of her eyepieces, and moisture from her breath was already beading on the circles of glass. The only reason she could talk to the rest of the crew was because of the internal vox.

Outside on the hull a sheet of burning vapour vented from the cone of the cannon. The slime clinging to its hull ignited. Flames crawled across *Lantern*, scorching the Amaranth stripes from its turret. Black liquid splattered up in its wake, as it dragged a cloak of guttering flame.

For Tahirah everything had started to move very fast from the moment she had targeted the enemy vehicle and Lachlan had fired. She had trained in war machines for half a decade, been through live fire drills and logged over a hundred machine hours. But this was like nothing she had ever felt. Information and sensations washed over her. Dozens of thoughts, fears and possibilities formed and fled in a second. It was like trying to catch hold of a storm. It was the gap, she realised, the gap between training and reality, the gap she had always wanted to cross.

Plumes of heat and gas blurred her view out of the periscope. Red icons painted the point where the enemy machine had been. It was not moving. Good enough.

'Kill confirmed,' said Tahirah. The auspex was screeching. A shape had emerged from the green pixel fog. 'Enemy, left flank, sixty degrees, engage when you see them.'

'I can't see them,' shouted Genji.

'Traversing,' said Lachlan next to her, and the turret began to turn in its collar.

'*I can't see anything.*'

Genji, thought Tahirah. Terra, she wished the girl would stop shouting. Tahirah did not answer; she had no idea what was going on. The enemy had vanished off the auspex. Flashes of amber, green and red danced across the black screen. She tried to focus on the auspex screen, flicking glances out of the periscope blocks. She could not see a damned thing either.

She turned her view to the green icons of *Silence* and *Deathlight* on the auspex screen. Together they formed a wedge with *Lantern* at the tip. The first kill had been straight ahead and even then they had only been able to see it because of the heat bloom. Now they could not pinpoint the rest of the enemy force. She knew that there was a very real chance of the squadron falling apart, of doing something fatally stupid and hitting each other as they tried to kill the enemy. She pushed the right-hand cup of her headphones over her ear and clicked to transmit.

'All call signs, this is *Lantern*, engage only with visual confirmation.'

Hector and Brel acknowledged the command, their voices almost lost in the rising jumble of sound around her.

‘Where the hell have they gone?’ said Lachlan. His face was pressed against the rubber eyepieces of the Executioner’s main weapon targeter.

‘I’ve got one,’ came another shout. It was Udo, in the right sponson. She glanced at the auspex and saw the angular red return of metal and heat to their right. A target.

Sharp-eyed little rat, she thought.

‘Turn, right, right, right. Target, right flank, eighty degrees narrowing, visual confirm to engage.’ The tone of the engine changed and the turret began to turn.

‘I’ve got it,’ shouted Udo.

‘Confirm enemy,’ said Tahirah, but the right sponson’s firing light was already glowing amber on her control panel. She opened her mouth to shout.

‘Firing.’

‘Udo! Confirm, damn you.’

The lightning-crack of the lascannon echoed through the compartment.

‘Hit,’ whooped Udo.

Tahirah pressed her eyes against one of the periscope viewers. She could barely see ten metres. Ochre clouds swirled in front of her eyes like silt in churned water. She switched to infra-sight and the world became a haze of grey. The heat of the las discharge was a fading line through the fog.

‘*Lantern, this is Deathlight.*’ Hector’s voice spat from her headset. ‘*I have las flare to my front. Almost hit us. What’s going on?*’

‘Udo!’ shouted Tahirah.

‘It was them, I saw,’ called Udo. She could almost see his face twist with denial, as if shooting the front off a friendly was just another understandable mistake.

‘Shut up,’ she snarled. Icons were dancing across the auspex now, fading from red to amber, overlaying and contradicting. It was like trying to punch someone you could only hear in the middle of a rain storm. The enemy were there, they were right–

Red blossomed across the auspex. The *Lantern* rocked. White light flashed from the eyepieces of her periscopes. Lachlan swore. She glanced at him. His hands were pressed against his eyes. Genji and Makis were shouting. The auspex cleared. She stared.

Deathlight’s green icon had vanished. A white smudge of heat rolled where it had been. *Lantern* kept driving forwards, its turret traversing so that it faced back towards Hector’s last position. Tahirah’s fingers slipped as she thumbed the comm-stud.

‘*Deathlight*, this is *Lantern*,’ she began.

‘It’s gone,’ shouted Lachlan. She did not want to look at him. She could hear enough in his voice.

‘*Deathlight*, respond.’

‘It’s gone.’

Her skin suddenly felt very cold. Sounds seemed to be louder and further away.

Genji’s voice cut through her. ‘Target. Firing.’

‘Wait,’ said Tahirah, but the word was lost as the left sponson fired.

Akil closed his eyes against the glare as the fog outside lit up. Rashne was screaming into the vox. The world was all vibration and sudden noise. For a second when the oncoming tank had vanished in a ball of fire he had thought it was them – that they had been hit, and that he was trapped in his last second of awareness.

Then the light had turned red, and black smoke had stained the firelit fog.

More sound and light, and teeth-aching tremors spun around him as he pressed his eyelids shut and Rashne screamed on and on.

‘Stop,’ said Brel calmly. The rest of the crew said nothing, but he felt the engine disengage and the tone of the noise drop in the compartment. Jallinika was looking back at him, waiting for him to tell her if there was a target worth trying to see; they both knew that if she had her eye to gunsight without reason she would start firing at ghosts, or her own side.

Old ways, and old tricks, thought Brel. *And here we all are again. Home, like we never left.*

The fight had begun just how they always had, with a roar of death and then the hurtling descent into anarchy. He had felt *Silence* rock when *Deathlight* had gone up, and had heard Tahirah calling for a response. Tahirah’s machine had no idea what was going on, but they were still moving and firing anyway, at an enemy of unknown strength and unknown nature. All they had were the blips on their screens and the images skidding across their sights. They might get another kill, but they were dangerous to stay close to.

Brel watched the auspex display. The *Lantern* had one confirmed kill, and the enemy had fired back and killed the *Deathlight* in reply. That meant a minimum of one enemy machine still out there, as well as the lost scout machine. The enemy were good. They must have broken formation as soon as they were ready to engage, and they were using the fog and auspex interference to hide themselves.

Or they were jamming our scanners and comms, he thought, *reducing both to unreliable junk. Very good indeed*.

‘Jal,’ he said into the intra-crew vox. ‘Strength of an elite hunter unit in these conditions?’

‘Three.’ She shrugged. ‘No more than four.’

‘Two?’

She laughed. ‘Only if you had no choice.’

Brel nodded, and let out a long breath.

‘Yeah. I was worried you would agree.’

He thought for a moment longer, and then gave one order.

‘Shut down the engine. Keep the load in the main gun. Keep comms, air, sights and auspex up, but close down the transponder.’

There was the barest moment of hesitation. The transponder sent out a constant signal telling all other friendly units set to the same frequency where they were and that they were not something to fire at. Without it the *Silence* would appear as an unknown return on friendly auspex screens, and in a battle like this they would be a target to everyone.

‘Now,’ said Brel, and a second later the *Silence* became an inert slab of cooling armour.

‘Hit,’ called Genji. Tahirah shook her head, tried to focus, tried to grasp the passing threads of events.

‘Kill confirmed,’ said Lachlan. ‘I see fire.’

Tahirah pressed her eyes to the periscope’s eyepieces. Flames lit the fog, spreading through it in an angry red glow as if the air itself was burning. She blinked moisture from her eyes. The fog thinned and she saw the enemy machine. She had not seen the first target clearly – none of them had, not even Lachlan as he pulled the trigger. The wreck had a low hull with raked frontal armour, and two weapon booms jutting from its flanks. One of the booms was gone, severed to a blackened stump. Its turret was a carbuncular dome, bearing the ribbed barrel of a conversion beamer. A skull grinned from the front plate in black wrought iron. She knew the class and she knew the emblem from a thousand remembrancer captured images of the Imperial conquest.

Predator class, she thought. *Iron Warriors Legion*. And it was not dead, not even close.

‘Oh, *illumination*,’ she whispered.

‘What?’ said Lachlan.

The Predator was moving, thrusting towards them, its turret traversing to point back at her.

‘Kill not confirmed!’ yelled Tahirah. ‘Kill it, Lach! Kill it now!’

‘I see it,’ called Lachlan as the turret traversed. He went still, his finger on the firing trigger. ‘Oh, skies of Terra,’ he breathed.

‘Fire!’ Tahirah cried. The Predator was slowing, the muzzle of its turret gun settling on her like a dead stare.

‘I–’

‘*Now!*’ she shouted.

Lachlan squeezed the trigger, and the destroyer cannon screamed. The blast hit the Predator's turret collar and blew it off in a shower of half-melted armour. The destroyer kept firing, streaming plasma into the target, raking it with a sun's fury.

Heat warning lights bloomed around Tahirah, and suddenly the inside of *Lantern* was soaked in red. She reached across and knocked Lachlan's hand from the gun's trigger. Gas vented into the turret. Vail was swearing, scrambling for the coolant release lever at the rear of his pit beneath the main gun. He yanked it down and Tahirah heard the coolant lines ring with sudden pressure. The red lights turned amber a second later.

She breathed out. Vail had released the auxiliary lines just in time. Another second and the gun would have vented searing hot vapour into the turret; now it would off-line while it cooled properly. Lachlan was looking at her, his eyes wide behind the circles of his suit's eyepieces.

'Main weapon down,' she announced calmly, and thanked the suit for hiding the tears she could feel on her cheeks.

'Boss…' Lachlan's voice was low.

She turned away, taking in the auspex at a glance and speaking into the vox. She shook her head, focused on the auspex, on the red markers showing the two machine kills, and the eerie white where *Deathlight* had died. A yellow marker flickered on the edge of the screen highlighting an unidentified contact.

'Target left – there is something else out there,' she said, and heard her words echo across the vox.

'Boss, I saw them before I fired,' said Lachlan as if he had not heard her.

She squinted at the static-laden display. The yellow marker of the unidentified machine was dimming, ringed with fading heat.

'As if it were a cooling wreck,' she muttered to herself. 'Or as if it cut its engine.'

'I saw the enemy crew trying to get out of the wreck,' said Lachlan.

'Target is live,' she called. 'Say again, target is live. Bastard is trying to hide.'

'They were legionaries,' said Lachlan, and snorted as if he had said something ridiculous. 'The enemy out there are Space Marines.'

Tahirah heard the words, and thought of the iron skull on the hull of the Predator. *Space Marines,* the thought rang in her head. *Our enemies are Iron Warriors.*

'I have visual!' shouted Genji in the left sponson.

Tahirah looked out of the periscope. The target was there, a low angular shape, half exposed by a billow in the fog. She opened her mouth to give the kill order.

'Fir–'

'*Can you hear us?*' the voice burst into her ears, filled with panic and static. Human. Tahirah felt her mind turn over, her mouth and body frozen. '*Please,*'

came the voice again. '*Please say you can hear us.*'

'Tah, I have the target,' called Genji.

'Hold!' shouted Tahirah. She was suddenly aware of fresh sweat prickling over her skin inside the enviro-suit.

'This is *Lantern*. We hear and see you. Identify yourself.'

For a second there was nothing, and then the voice came back.

'*Rashne, my name is Rashne*.' She could hear the tremble in the words.

It's them, she thought. *It's the scout and I almost ordered them dead*.

She glanced back at the auspex, the heat markers of the dead flickering in the green swell of static. No sign of *Silence*. Perhaps the seals had failed on their machine. Perhaps they were somewhere out there beyond auspex range. Perhaps the fog…

She shut off the train of thought.

Two enemies dead – maybe – for the loss of half her squadron. Somehow, she had never thought her first engagement would come down to such a cold equation.

But it did not matter. Not now. It was a long way back to the shelter complex, and what remained of her squadron needed to be far away and fading in the fog before more Iron Warriors came for them. She thumbed the external transmission button.

'Rashne,' she said into the vox. She noticed that her voice was still calm and steady. It did not feel like it belonged to her. 'We are coming to you. Move to flank us when you see us, and stay so close that you can see the serial numbers on the hull.'

'*All right,*' said Rashne. '*All right*.'

'Good. And use your call sign. Out.' She switched to the internal vox. 'Mak, get us moving. Left, forty degrees.'

Makis called in acknowledgement, and she felt *Lantern*'s engine gun to full life as they came about.

We have slain angels and lived, she thought, and began to let out a long breath.

The Predator cannon round hit *Lantern* as it was turning, and blew the left sponson off in a shriek of shearing metal.

'There you are,' said Brel, his eyes steady on the auspex as the enemy flared red with heat. 'Jallinika, target is right flank, twenty degrees and coming closer. Take the shot as soon as you can see its back. Cal, power us up and take us straight forward, on my word.' He paused. Around him his machine and crew were waiting: Jallinika with her eyes pressed to the firing sight, Calsuriz with his hand on the ignition, Selq holding the next round for the main gun.

So still, he thought. *All of them so still*.

The enemy was accelerating forward from where it had folded itself into a pocket of interference. He could try and take it now, but the angle was not optimal, not for a machine kill. That and he had to be sure that it was alone. The *Lantern* was taking fire. He could hear the boom and smack of the enemy Predator's cannon. The *Lantern* was slewing around as it tried to turn its frontal armour to meet the enemy.

'Smart move,' Brel muttered to himself. A flattened *boom* rang through the stillness. The enemy had fired again. The *Lantern* was trying to turn, but the Predator was faster and would be behind her again in a few seconds.

Tahirah tried to breathe. Alarms were fighting with the howl of the engine. Udo was screaming into the vox. Dozens of thoughts crowded her mind.

Where did they come from? They have us cold. Nothing we can do. Where were they? Has the hull lost integrity? We are going to die now. They were trying to get behind us. We have to turn. We have to return fire. We have to–

Something hit the front armour with the force of a Titan's kick, and *Lantern* rang like a gong. Tahirah's head slammed into the cannon mount. Blackness bloomed at the edge of her vision. Then the machine slewed and the force whipped her backwards like a ragdoll. There was blood on the inside of her eyepieces. Her ears were ringing, her skull filling with darkness.

'No!' she shouted, but the *Lantern* was pulsing with wild alarm light, and all she could hear was Udo screaming that he could see something.

Please, she thought, though she did not know to whom she was pleading. *Not here. Not now.*

'Now,' called Brel. The *Silence* roared as it came to life. Stillness became the bone-rattling scream of metal moving against metal, of engines breathing fumes and power. They ground forwards, slow at first then faster. The turret traversed, with a hiss of motors and bearings. The enemy had seen them and was slowing, turning to meet this new threat.

'Got you,' said Jallinika, and Brel could hear the smile in the words. 'Firing.'

The Vanquisher shell hit the Predator on its rear plating and lodged inside in the blink of an eye.

The Predator detonated. A fire cloud expanded through the fog, scattering chunks of armour. The turret lifted from its back like a leaf in a gust of wind. For a second, the fog was smeared the colour of blood and molten iron. Then the fire curdled to black smoke over the tank's carcass.

Brel blinked and nodded to himself.

'Come into formation with the others.'

After a second he flicked the external vox live.

'*Lantern*, this is *Silence*,' he said.

A burst of curses filled his ears. For some reason it made him smile. After a few seconds a lull came. He clicked the vox open again.

‘*Lantern*, this is *Silence*. You are very welcome.’

The Iron Warriors had thought the battle done. In the long weeks since the virus bombardment their forces on Tallarn's surface had seen no sign of any survivors. Their first battle losses corrected that understanding. Their response was to pour more forces onto the planet's surface. Dark-hulled macro-landers sank into Tallarn's atmosphere to dump armoured vehicles onto the sludge-covered plains.

Typhon siege tanks, Sabre Hunters, Land Raiders, Predators and Fellblades rolled from the landing grounds, gouging trenches in the sludge. These were the vehicles of the Legiones Astartes, crewed by Iron Warriors sealed in atmosphere-hardened armour. Beside them came detachments of Mechanicum war engines, Legio Cybernetica maniples and the war machines of half a dozen human cohorts bonded to the IV Legion. Tens of thousands of vehicles spread out from a dozen dropsites across Tallarn's two main continents.

It was a force that had broken enemies of many times their number, but in truth it was only a fraction of the Iron Warriors might. Much remained aboard their ships, but there was no error in the Iron Warriors calculations: they would end what upstart life remained on Tallarn. That was beyond doubt.

Iron Warriors signals ran across the surface, scratching on the dead wind, blowing and clicking across ruined cities and sludge plains. The signals rose from the block-sided landing craft of the invaders, and scattered to the sky and the ships that waited above. Buried in their shelters the survivors listened. Arrays trawled the air, catching rattling snatches of code, and taking them beneath the earth to where men and women sat hunched in the half-darkness, listening to the signals scratch and whine. They did not know what the Iron Warriors were saying, but they knew that it meant that the enemy had come in strength.

The defenders' own signals, carried on buried cables beneath the cities and under mountains, went unheard by the invaders. A few amongst the leaders of the scattered shelters spoke of waiting, of surviving beneath the earth in silence. The survivors were alone, they argued. They had no way of calling for help, even if there was help that could come to them. Better to be still, to hope that the enemy would pass on and leave the dead world they had made. But more were the voices that said that the invaders must bleed no matter the cost.

THREE

Contamination
Sides
Guilt

The klaxons stopped screaming. A second later, the light in the decontamination chamber turned a cold blue.

Like water under the sun, thought Akil.

‘Come on,’ he said to Rashne, forgetting that the boy could not hear him. The scout machine was powered down, the internal and external vox dead. He moved to where Rashne sat and tapped him on the arm. Rashne’s head came up slowly, and Akil noticed that the eyes behind the lenses took a moment to focus. Akil raised a thumb, and pointed to the machine’s rear hatch. Rashne turned his head to look, and then scrambled towards it. Akil followed, reaching for the release handle.

He paused, waiting for the double siren blare that would mean it was safe to unseal the tank. Rashne started slapping the metal of the hatch and rocking backwards and forwards.

The signal sounded and Akil pulled the handle. The hatch hissed as it opened and blue light spilled in. Rashne pushed the door wide and shot out, trailing his air bottle behind him on its rubber tube. Akil stepped out.

The chamber beyond was a vast cylinder, its walls ribbed with concentric metal rings wide enough to encircle three tanks abreast. Nozzles studded the walls, still dripping cleansing fluid. Metal grates covered a void that extended beneath the floor, and behind them great blast doors shut out the world above. In front, more blast doors waited.

On either side of the scout vehicle, the crews of *Lantern* and *Silence* pulled themselves out of their machines. *Lantern*’s left sponson was a twisted mess of metal, its gun ripped away, the empty gunner’s alcove exposed.

Someone died there, Akil realised. He stared for a moment, then looked away quickly.

Thick, colourless liquid dripped from the tracks and hulls of the three tanks. High-pressure hoses and rad-beams had washed over them, stripping everything toxic from their hulls and killing anything organic. The tanks were now clean enough that the crews could come out from their sealed guts, but there was still a risk; the tanks would need another decontamination cycle before they could be

allowed back into the shelter itself. The crews would leave the chamber, and the rotating ring-collars would blast the tanks again, this time with a stronger dose of rad and chem. Nothing could survive that.

At least, that was the theory. This was the first of the doors back into the underworld from the hell above, but it was not the last. They had to pass through another set before they could remove their suits. Then they would be treated to the same decontamination process as the machines. After that they could be declared fit to breathe the same air as the rest of the shelter complex.

Akil began to move towards the small accessway to the side of the blast doors.

The cry of alarm was muffled, but he still heard it. He turned. Beside him the crews of the other two tanks had gone very still. Rashne was on the ground, his hand around the back of his head. For a second he thought the boy was having a seizure. Then he saw what whoever had cried out had seen.

Rashne was not having a seizure – he was pulling the hood of his enviro-suit off.

Akil had taken two steps towards the boy when the rubber collar came loose. He went still. Rashne knelt on the floor, gasping as he breathed the free air once more. His thatch-blond hair was matted and sweat beaded his forehead.

Akil watched, his own breath still in his mouth as Rashne sucked down great lungfuls. The boy looked up, his eyes blue and bright. He smiled, and took another breath. Nothing happened. Rashne began to stand unsteadily.

Sirens howled. Red lights flashed, staining the wet vehicles crimson. Rashne yelped and half fell, his hand flying out to the hull of the scout vehicle to catch himself. Akil stepped forward, reaching to grab the boy, but Rashne pushed himself back up. His gloved hand came away from the surface of the machine. Akil could see the sheen of moisture on the fingers. The boy was not looking at him – Rashne brought his hand up and wiped the sweat from his eyes. It was a gesture as unconscious as the beating of a heart.

Akil's hand closed on Rashne's arm. The boy turned to look at him. Rashne's mouth opened.

Blood poured from his eyes. Pustules bloomed across his face, burst and grew, eating into his flesh in widening craters. Dark tendrils spread across his skin as blood clotted to black slime. Akil felt the boy's arm go soft under his grip. His hand opened and Rashne fell to the ground like a bag of offal.

Akil felt himself fall, and the vomit rise in his throat. The sensation was oddly distant, as if he was observing it in someone else, as if his mind had retreated to a place where the present no longer belonged to him. He heard himself trying to scream. He saw himself hit the ground, and felt arms wrap around him and drag him across the floor towards the small door in the side of the chamber.

Behind him, the dissolving body of Rashne lay in the pulsing red light.

‘This might go better if you give us the room,’ said Brel to the rest of them. Jallinika and Calsuriz were already standing, their muscles tense as though they were about to snap. ‘That means you all get out,’ he clarified.

He brought his hands up to rub his eyes as the bunk room emptied around him. He waited until the sounds of scraping boots and muttering faded, and the door clicked shut. He looked up.

Tahirah stood, her eyes bright and hard, arms loose by her sides as if she was keeping them deliberately under control. Fury radiated off her. Brel looked away and let out a long breath. He had only been out of decontamination for an hour and he could already feel the pain soaking into his head again. His tongue and saliva tasted of tin, and the buzz of the lumen strips in the cramped bunk room made him want to close his eyes. He wanted very much to not have to talk, to just be able to sit quietly and listen to his crew bicker around him. He did not want this.

‘Lieutenant,’ he said carefully.

‘Stand up,’ she said quietly, and Brel heard the tremble of anger in her voice. He stood, blowing out another breath.

‘Salute,’ she said. He saluted, carefully, without show. ‘Again,’ she said. He saluted again. She took a step forward. Brel knew it was coming.

I should just ride it, he thought. *Take the licks and move on, roll with the current and feed off the bottom.*

Tahirah took a breath.

‘If you ever–’

‘I don’t care,’ he said in a blank voice.

He looked up. Tahirah had frozen, her mouth open as if he had punched her in the gut and she couldn’t breathe. He watched the shock and rage flow across her face.

‘I–’ she began again.

‘I don’t care what you are going to say about what I did out there. I don’t care that you are my squadron’s commanding officer – I don’t care about what happened. I’m sorry that you do, but you will have to settle for that.’

He turned and sat back down on the edge of his bunk. Tahirah looked as if she was trying to climb back up the mountain of her anger. Brel sighed.

‘Trust me, I can understand. One machine, one gunner and one kid too stretched out inside to keep his hood on in primary decontamination. That’s quite a load for someone to take, and so I understand that in your head coming to chew me out was about the only thing that you feel you can control.’ He paused and nodded, half to himself and half to her. ‘But I don’t care. My crew doesn’t care, and if you want the truth, no one else cares. All they care about is if they are going to come out of this alive or not.’

Tahirah's jaw was working, as though she was struggling to form what she wanted to say. Her skin had gone very white, the blood drained away. Her pupils were black pinpricks.

Her hands are shaking too, thought Brel. *She must be half my age and here she is probably a twitch away from hitting me.* He shook his head, and reached under the bunk. Tahirah tensed on the edge of his sight. He brought the bottle out slowly, shook it once so that the clear liquid within sloshed against the glass.

'Truth,' he said, producing a pair of tin cups and pouring a measure into each. He held one out to Tahirah. 'It always tastes bitter.'

Tahirah took the cup but did not drink. Brel took a swig from his own, and felt the liquor roll like fire down his throat. Tahirah looked at her cup for a long moment, and then raised it to her mouth. A second later her eyes began to water and she tried to suppress a cough. Brel almost laughed.

Tahirah snorted, and stepped back to sit on a pressed metal chair.

'I read your records,' she said, and took another sip. Brel raised an eyebrow.

'They actually still have records here? Thought they would have lost them by now.'

'Medical mainly, but there was a service list attached.'

Brel rolled his cup between his hands and avoided her eye.

'By my reckoning this would be what, your twelfth war?'

'Thirteenth, actually,' Brel replied, still not looking at her. 'They didn't count the Halo Margins. No one likes to remember a farce followed by a defeat. Not in the *Great* Crusade.' The grafted skin around the back of his head and down his arms was starting to itch again; it always did when he thought about the past. 'Because it's not your own,' Fastinex had joked when Brel had told the loader about his flesh grafts itching. His mouth twitched for a second. *Twenty years since that fat bastard caught a ricochet,* he thought, *and still his dumb face makes me smile.*

'I found a list of decorations and citations too. Even a couple of recommendations for promotion. Then you wind up here, and… nothing. Not even a record of reprimand.'

'Forgotten, that's what we are. You must have noticed.'

'Not any more,' she said. Brel remained silent. 'They are raising more units. Command has put the order out – every piece of machinery is going to be armed, and every person that can breathe recycled air is going to fight. Not just volunteers, anyone who is fit enough to ride a machine is going to be trained. They want us to strike back.'

Brel laughed before he could stop himself.

'Is that funny?' Tahirah asked.

‘Yes,’ nodded Brel. ‘In a way, it is the most hilarious thing I have heard in years.’ He put the cup down and poured another thick measure into the bottom. ‘No one cared about this place, not even when the rest of the Imperium started busting itself apart. Now one side has decided to reduce it to slime, and we are putting men and women in war machines who will die in seconds.’ He smiled. ‘Yeah, funny.’

‘It’s their home.’

‘*Was* their home. I doubt they would want to live there now.’ He took another gulp and rolled his neck to release the tension in his muscles. He looked up at Tahirah, his face an impassive mask to her glassy-eyed anger.

‘You cold bastard.’

‘Tastes bitter, like I said.’

‘We need to fight with everything we have. The traitors–’

‘What?’ he said, and grinned again without humour. ‘You think that the higher-ups here on Tallarn are pulling together because they believe in one ideology over the other? All they care is that the one side is trying to kill us and the other is not. Which side are we on, anyway?’

Tahirah stood. The quivering anger was back. She drew the laspistol slightly clumsily, but he noticed that the barrel did not shake as she levelled it at his face.

‘That’s sedition,’ she said quietly.

‘Go ahead,’ he said. ‘One more tank commander gone and the enemy didn’t even need to fire a shot. Maybe *they* will give you a medal.’

He brought his cup slowly to his mouth, took a sip and looked back up into the barrel of her gun. After a second she let the pistol drop to her side. Brel nodded his thanks.

‘I am going to do you a favour now, for free, because it is still early enough for you. Stop thinking of us as people. Me, my crew, that hawk-eyed civilian, or any of the rest that get hooked up to you. They *are* the machines they ride, and they do it well or they do it badly. That is all you care about, because that is all that matters to getting through this.’

Slowly and carefully, Tahirah put her cup down on the empty chair and took a step towards the door. Brel let out a long tired breath, but Tahirah spun faster than he could react and punched him hard across the jaw. Very hard.

He fell to the floor, his head buzzing. Lying there, he heard Tahirah pick up the half-empty bottle and walk away. He was tempted to laugh, but the door had already shut behind her.

Akil sat on the floor, alone and silent, his eyes staring at water dripping down the plascrete wall. For a second he wondered if the water had seeped in from outside the bunker, then he laughed at his own thought.

If it was from outside I would be dead already, he thought, and remembered the rotting pits opening in Rashne's face.

He shifted his legs up so that they were huddled against his chest. The overalls they had given him felt rough and stiff against his skin. His own clothes had been burned once he was past the first stage of decontamination. He was not sure why, but he could see the fear in the soldiers' eyes, and so he had stripped off another layer of his life and seen it dumped into a furnace without question.

Adrenaline had drained from him once he was inside the shelter. It had been like the tide receding after a storm to reveal the wreckage of its passing. People walked by, all in uniforms, all moving with apparent purpose. Some looked at him, but he was careful not to meet their gaze. He did not want to talk to anyone. He did not want to see himself in their eyes. He had walked down long grey corridors without knowing where he was going, until he just stopped. In the end he had just sat down with his back against the wall and waited for something to make sense. He was fairly sure that that had been several hours ago. He blinked and shook his head. He felt tired and empty.

There is nothing left to me that is not buried or hidden. My world lives on only in sealed graves now. He cupped his hands, staring at the lines of his palms. *What am I doing? I am no warrior. I never was, and what is there to fight for now anyway?* Clustered in the deep chambers, he had heard the other refugees talk of striking back, and striking back until the enemy poured blood into the dead soil of Tallarn.

Tallarn. Every time he thought or heard the word he felt the guilt rise from the pit of his thoughts. The dead skulls of buildings, and the look on Rashne's face in the instant before his eyes dissolved, blossomed once again in his mind's eye.

'Thinking too hard can kill you, you know,' said a voice from above him.

He looked up. A woman with a sharp face, cropped dark hair and baggy fatigues was looking down at him. She smiled, and Akil saw the tiredness in the gesture.

'Lieutenant,' he said, and started to get to his feet. She waved him back and dropped down next to him. He had not met her before joining the squadron, and had spoken all of ten words to her before they had gone up to the world above.

'Tahirah, please,' she said, and he smelled the alcohol on her breath. She reached into a thigh pouch and pulled out a bottle. Clear liquid sloshed in the bottom. She opened it and took a swig, then offered the bottle to him. 'But Tah will do.'

He looked up at her, then at the bottle. Tahirah gave a small shrug. He took it from her.

The alcohol was surprisingly smooth in his mouth, but he coughed when it hit his throat. Tahirah laughed.

‘Thanks,’ said Akil, as numb warmth spread through him.

‘Yeah, that stuff is pretty to the point.’

He spread the fingers of his left hand, his eyes tracing the folds and lines of the skin. He took another swig. This time he felt his throat numb at the alcohol’s touch, and did not cough.

‘I am sorry,’ he said.

‘For getting lost?’ she asked. She held out a hand for the bottle and he handed it back. ‘Yeah, that was pretty stupid, but you drive a machine well enough, and you seem like you don’t make a habit of stupidity. So…’ She trailed away, and he saw that her eyes were unfocused, as if she were looking at a memory. Then she shook her head and frowned. ‘Not your fault really. We lost you as much as you got lost.’ She took a gulp from the bottle. ‘Did you see them?’

‘Who? The enemy?’

Tahirah nodded.

‘No, I just saw the… machines. But your gunner, Lachlan, he said he saw them.’ He paused and glanced at Tahirah. ‘He said they were Space Marines.’

‘Iron Warriors,’ she said with a nod. ‘And a lot of them. That is what command are saying. The soup above is singing with their signals.’

Akil frowned. He had heard of the Legiones Astartes, of course. He had even seen one of their number at a distance once, when he was a boy. His father had been invited to a ceremony to mark the outset of some campaign – or the successful completion of one, Akil had never been sure. All the other great merchant princes had been there. The air had glittered with gold, and coiled with scent, and the Space Marine had stood beside the Governor-Militant like a dusk leopard amongst butterflies.

Iron Warriors. He had only dimly known the name before, and now it was the name of the slayers of his world.

‘They can die, just like us,’ said Akil, hearing the edge in his own voice.

Tahirah glanced at him, and raised an eyebrow. He took another swig from the bottle but did not speak. She shrugged.

‘They also say that there might be infiltrators in here with us, spies and traitors working for the other side, though I don’t see how.’ She gave a snort of laughter. ‘Paranoia is the only thing that is easy to find at the moment.’

Akil gave a short shake of his head, and then turned his gaze back to Tahirah.

‘Is it true what they say? That we are alone, that word never got out?’

‘Seems that way,’ she said, and shrugged. ‘But I don’t know. Perhaps command found a living astropath out there somewhere, or perhaps a ship in orbit made it out of the system. Perhaps the full might of the Imperium is coming to our aid.’

He gave a snort of laughter.

‘They never did before.’

Tahirah cocked her head, looking at him more closely.

‘You are from here, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’ He nodded and looked at his hands. ‘Yes, this is my world.’

‘Family?’

He thought of his daughters. Had they been asleep when the bombs fell? Had they reached a shelter?

‘Yes. I mean, I think… I hope so.’

‘Seems like a lot of people made it to shelters.’ Tahirah looked at him steadily. ‘Your family might be here or in one that is connected to the communications network. I know some people in the command cadre. Your family’s name might be on a list of known survivors.’

For a second he just stared back at her, then he felt the prickle in his eyes, and blinked.

‘Thank you. Thank you, Tahirah,’ he said, and felt the smile spread over his face. She smiled back, but he caught a glitter in her eye and saw that the smile was in pity and not joy.

‘I came to find you, anyway,’ she said, after a moment.

‘What? Why?’

Tahirah stood, took a final gulp from the bottle, and looked down at him.

‘Because we are going back out. And you are coming with us.’

Ithak-ja. *At first the military commanders and soldiers had thought it was a greeting. Then they had presumed it was a curse. Then they realised that it was neither.*

The phrase ran from mouth to ear amongst the civilians in the shelters. Men and women would whisper the word to each other when they met. Parents would speak it to their children as though it were a cure for their fear. Old friends would clasp hands and speak it before parting. None of the soldiers asked the survivors what it meant, and those that did were met with dark looks and shaking heads, as if they had asked why one needed to breathe.

Then, just when the curiosity of the soldiers was running thin, the volunteers came forward. First a few, a ragged clutch of the bold. Then more – old and young, men and women, clustered together into the corridors outside the shelter's command levels. When officers emerged, the ragged civilians would say that they had come to volunteer, that they would fill the ranks of those that died amongst the soldiers, that they would crew any war machine, and follow any order.

At first the scattered defence command refused, but with every raid against the Iron Warriors the loss of crews and machines increased. They could replace machines: unused materiel littered the forgotten corners of the shelters and staging bunkers. Most of the equipment was either old and damaged, or new and incomplete, but damage could be repaired and replacement components found. What could not be replaced were the bodies that steered the machines, manned the guns and pulled the triggers. So, at last, the terrible arithmetic of war gave the last citizens of Tallarn what they wished for – they would raid across the land they had lost and kill those who had taken it from them.

The old, the weak and the very young were sent away. Those that remained were shown how to control an armoured machine, how to load, how to zero and fire a weapon, and how to use a vox-unit. As training it was too quick and not enough; the soldiers knew it and so did the volunteers. Most also knew that the world above would teach them or kill them, but no one said as much. What would be the point of speaking that truth out loud?

Once their few hours of training had passed, the volunteers were spread amongst units that had suffered losses. A few, those with aptitude and skill, were given control of machines. Only then, once they knew that they would live or die together, did the soldiers ask their new brothers and sisters in war what 'ithak-ja' meant.

It was an old phrase, the Tallarn explained, spoken in a time which none could remember outside of stories. It had many meanings, but here and now it only had

one meaning that mattered.

‘Vengeance,’ they said. ‘It means vengeance.’

FOUR

Kill-zone
We are all war machines
Death rattle

‘Three targets confirmed.’ Akil waited while the vox hissed in his ears.

‘*Just three?*’ the dry voice asked.

Brel, of course it was Brel. Akil had never heard the man say a word outside of the squadron vox: not in the hours spent going through decontamination, not in the shelter, not in all of the past weeks of war. Only out here, in the world of the dead, did they connect.

The cold bastard had a point though. Akil had seen seven Iron Warriors patrol groups, and all had been six strong. He put his eye to the sight again, zoomed out and panned from left to right and back. The fog was thinning, pulling back to show splintered buildings ringing the open flats like broken teeth around a rotten tongue. The enemy had bombarded this place more than once, flattening it with creeping barrages, trying to flush the raiders out. They had failed.

He switched his sight to infra-red and the fog, ground and ruins became a dull curtain of ambient heat. The fog was thin enough here that you could see a hundred metres without infra-sight, but there was no point. Heat vision was the daylight of this war.

The engine bloom of the three Iron Warriors machines stood out in bright green as they moved across the flats. Spots of yellow showed where components were running hot or a track was grinding out heat as it scraped past the hull. Cooling fumes trailed from their exhausts, and their engine blocks were blotches of near-white. He squinted and tweaked his zoom, trying to see if there were more machines running behind those that he could see.

No, there were just three: a huge slab-sided machine crawling between two of the smaller kind he had learned to call ‘Predators’. The bigger one looked more like a block of raw iron than a fighting vehicle. Clusters of lascannons hung from its flanks and its tracks looked thicker than his own machine’s armour.

‘Three enemy confirmed – two Predator, one of unknown class. Large, upward-sloped front, two quad las-clusters on the sides.’

‘*Spartan,*’ cut in Tahirah’s voice. ‘*Land Raider-class hull.*’

Akil nodded, even though there was almost no one to see. ‘All of them should be in the centre of the engagement zone in one-two-zero seconds.’

‘*Understood,*’ said Tahirah. ‘*All units, fire and converge at Talon’s signal.*’

The vox went silent, and Akil felt sweat tickle his brow. Without thinking, he raised his hand to rub the rubber of his suit above his eyes. For a second the image of Rashne raising his hand to wipe his bare face ghosted across his mind’s eye...

He blanked the memory out with a slow breath, and looked through the eyepiece above the steering levers. The infra-sight was new, like the lascannon fitted into the socket beside the drive controls, and the smeared grey-and-green disruption pattern on the outside hull. To Akil, the sight already had the familiar feel of something used again and again.

‘Sol’s light, look at that thing,’ said Udo. He crouched next to Akil, hugging the gunsight of the mounted lascannon. The internal vox somehow stretched the whining tone of Udo’s voice. ‘We could hit that Spartan square, and on the inside they would just think we were knocking to come in.’

‘It can be killed,’ said Akil, and knew it was a mistake as soon as he opened his mouth.

‘Yeah? How long have you been riding machines, old man?’

Akil shrugged, looking at the exposed links rattling over the slab-machine’s hull. A good shot could sever the links and leave the machine like a beached leviathan. Long weeks on the surface, sucking air from pressure bottles, watching the enemy, hiding from them, running from them and killing them had changed the way that he saw the world.

I am not the man I was, he thought. He felt his left hand flex as if from remembered pain.

After a long moment of silence Udo snorted. Akil remained silent this time; he had learned that it was advisable not to respond to most of what Udo said. The gunner was not happy about being assigned to the scout machine, but Akil had a feeling that even left in paradise Udo would have found something to whine about.

‘They are entering the bracket,’ said Akil quietly.

‘Gun live,’ replied Udo.

Akil watched the lead Predator grind over a rise in the terrain, its main gun flexing to stay level. Behind it the Spartan ground forwards.

‘Target the front vehicle,’ said Akil.

‘I have it.’

‘Take the tracks this time.’

‘I know, I know. Would you shut up, old man? Just remember your part.’

Akil shifted his grip on the lever that would start the machine’s engine. He could hear Udo breathing over the vox. The Iron Warriors tanks grew larger in his

view, the two Predators guarding the Spartan to its front and rear. He heard Udo take a single slow breath.

'Firing,' whispered Udo from beside Akil.

Akil's free hand thumbed the external vox.

'*Vengeance!*' he shouted.

A whip-crack of thunder filled his ears. He closed his eyes as the bolt of energy flashed through the air from the lascannon, and the sight blanked to white. The las-blast struck the Predator low, burning through track skirting and melting a drive wheel. For an instant the Predator's tracks kept moving, rattling through the broken cycle in a spray of molten metal. Then the tank slewed, its unbroken track pushing it in a skidding half-circle.

Inside the scout, Akil heard the thump and explosive crack of *Silence*'s shell hitting its target. The Predator vanished in an expanding cloud of black-streaked flame. Behind it the Spartan came on, scattering the flaming wreckage of its kin aside. The second Predator swerved to the flank, its turret traversing as it came.

Akil opened his eyes. Flame light was pouring through the scout's vision slits, and the view through the infra-sight danced with heat. Udo was whooping, his hands slapping the top of the gunsight. Akil pulled the ignition lever and *Talon*'s engine started. He slammed it into reverse gear and the scout pushed back from the low rise.

Akil could no longer feel anything, really; some part of him was moving the scout's controls, but all he was aware of was a high-pitched whine in his ears. This was the moment of survival or death. The Iron Warriors would know where they were now. They would have seen the beam of the lascannon shot like a finger pointing back to them. If the squadron had made an error in planning the ambush, or if they were too slow moving back, then they would die out here.

Talon accelerated backwards.

Thirty yards, then turn. The routine dominated Akil's thoughts as he felt the machine judder and buck in his hands. Beside him Udo was still cursing the enemy and cheering with glee at the kill.

'*Talon, the Spartan is coming after you,*' came Brel's voice, as flat and emotionless as a machine.

'Shoot it,' snarled Akil.

'*Waiting for a shot,*' said Brel.

The kill was a well-worn routine for Brel. They found a patrol, found an ambush site, then waited. The scout always picked the target, but it was Brel who laid the ambushes out. Tahirah had stopped questioning his suggestions and now just accepted them. Layout and angles were crucial. Once the scout hit the first target, *Silence* had to be in the right place to hit the target straight away and blow it to pieces.

Then came the messy part, the scrabbling to outrun the remaining enemy. They would hit targets of opportunity, but once they fired the first shots the objective was simply to survive. The scout was the most exposed in these moments, but that was just one of those facts that did not bother Brel. Tahirah and *Lantern* stayed back until the ambush was sprung; the Executioner's energy and heat signatures were just too bright for it to be part of the first strike, and its weaponry too unreliable against anything larger than a medium-grade tank. Backup, insurance, a slayer of opportunity. *Lantern* might bear the title of Executioner, but *Silence* was the squadron's true killer.

Hit once, hit hard, and run. It was a system that had kept them alive and killed eight Iron Warriors machines.

Brel watched as the Spartan closed in on the scout. *Silence* was almost a kilometre back from the kill site, and he was relying on infra-vision and auspex feeds to follow the battle. The Spartan was a glowing block, trailing streams of fire from the burning wreckage of the dead Predator. The surviving Predator was sweeping wide, its turret turning again to cover the Spartan's rear. They were good, of course – no hesitation and no panic. They had gone straight from being ambushed, into cover and counter attack.

Brel felt his mouth twitch and almost shook his head at his own thought.

Of course they were good. They were the Legiones Astartes.

'But out here, we are all war machines,' he muttered to himself.

'I have a clear shot to the Spartan's drive wheel,' said Jallinika. 'We might not kill it but we can cripple it.'

Brel felt something itch at the back of his thoughts. Something was just not right about this ambush: a factor or possibility he had overlooked. He paused, listening to his own breathing, watching the colours shift and smudge on the auspex.

'Boss?' said Jallinika.

'Take the shot,' said Brel softly. In his head, the itch of uncertainty grew.

Tahirah waited. It had been twenty-six seconds since the engagement began. Before that they had been waiting for seventy-two minutes. She knew this; like counting, like breathing, like not moving in order to hide her shakes. This was all just part of how she did things now.

'Do we go active, Tah?' asked Makis.

'Nope,' she said without moving. It felt quiet in *Lantern*, even with the distant growl of ordnance and engines.

'They must be ready to pull back by now.'

'Light up early, we get seen, we die.' She paused, clicked the vox off, and then thumbed it live again. 'I think we would be slightly less useful dead than we are alive.'

‘All right,’ said Makis, his tone saying that it was anything but all right in his opinion. Vail and the left and right gunners said nothing. They probably agreed with Makis, but quite honestly she did not care. She had got them into and back from six missions and nine separate engagements. That meant that, in her considered opinion, she did not care what they thought.

I should learn the new gunners’ real names, she thought. *Was the left one Forn, or was that Vantine?* She mentally shrugged, it did not matter. Neither was that good a shot, and she was not convinced about the repair to the sponson anyway; whichever of them was in there would probably be pasted sooner rather than later. Simpler not to worry about their names.

Beside her, Lachlan shifted in his seat, his silence sullen and complete. He hardly spoke now, not on mission, not back in the shelter. It had bothered her for a while, but then she had her own problems. They all had enough of those.

‘You should have a look, Tah,’ he said. She heard the edge in his voice and her head snapped up to look at him.

‘Why?’

‘Because this is about to go to hell.’

The left side of *Talon* hit something hard, and the chassis skidded around. Akil hit the brakes and the scout slammed to a halt. His head whipped forward and the top of his face slammed into the infra-sight. He tasted wet iron in his mouth and throat as he gasped for breath.

Udo had stopped cheering. Akil blinked, his eyes watering and blood flecking the inside of his eyepieces.

‘No, no...’ he gasped, and grabbed at the controls. ‘Please...’

The power plant snarled and *Talon* rocked in place, stuck firm on whatever it had hit. A sudden cold void had opened inside him, spreading ice through his body and brain.

‘No, please, not now...’

They had all seen it over the last few weeks, and heard stories of it again and again. Worse than a clean hit from the enemy, worse even than a seal failure, was to be stranded in the hell above. Thrown tracks, burned-out power plants, mired hulls: all were a slow death for the crew inside the tank. Unable to get out to repair or free themselves, they had to wait in their armoured coffin for the air supply to hiss to nothing.

Beside him, Udo had his eyepiece pressed to the gunsight, gazing at the fire and smoke-polluted fog outside. Akil nudged the scout forwards, and then slammed it into reverse. Straining gears and tracks screeched over the rising growl of the power plant. They did not move.

‘It’s coming,’ shouted Udo.

Akil looked up at the glowing image in the infra-sight. The Spartan loomed, heat washing from its power plant. He pushed more power into the reverse gear and *Talon* lurched again. It was coming straight at them. Akil released the power, felt the scout slump a little, and then rammed it back again. Something gave, and *Talon*'s tracks scrabbled on the slime-covered rubble.

The Spartan's lascannon clusters opened fire. Converging beams of lightning hit the rise of broken masonry just in front of *Talon*. The scout rang as chunks of white-hot plascrete struck its hull.

'Brel!' he shouted into the vox, but the word was lost in the sound of detonating metal.

The Vanquisher shell hit the Spartan's rear armour. Smoke and flames exploded outwards, and the massive chassis bucked like an angry beast. Its rear slammed back down in a cloud of smoke, lascannon clusters twitching.

'Got you,' whispered Brel. The huge tank was still alive but it was going nowhere. He clicked the vox open. 'Get moving, *Talon*.' The Spartan's weapons could come back online at any moment, and the remaining Predator was coming about hard and firing. Heavy rounds danced impact flashes across the ruins around the scout's position. Brel glanced away from the view.

'Get us moving, Cal,' he said, and the big driver grunted an affirmative.

Beside him, Jallinika cursed. He looked around at her, his ears filling with a stream of expletives.

'What?' he shouted.

She stopped cursing. 'Look,' she said.

He did.

'Oh.'

The front of the Spartan pistoned open in front of Akil's eyes. He saw something move in the space within, something that glinted dully in the fire. For a second Akil wondered if the tank had simply come apart from the damage it had suffered, but the burning figures broke from the Spartan's mouth at a run.

There were ten of them, ten nightmares cast in dull iron and brushed steel. Hammers, axes and claw blades wept lightning in their hands. Curved layers of armour hunched their shoulders, moving like iron-slab muscles as they ran. At first Akil just stared at them, his gaze locked upon the eyes shining in their black metal faces. He felt his mouth work soundlessly in his face, speaking a word he had heard once but now realised that he had never truly understood.

Terminators.

A bolt of energy streaked across the closing gap – Akil blinked a second too late, and the outline of an armoured figure burned across his retinas. He was screaming, screaming without being able to stop. Explosions rang against the hull. The lascannon fired again and again.

‘I killed one,’ gasped Udo. ‘I think I killed one.’

Akil forced his eyes open. The Terminators were forty metres away, firing as they came, the ground churning around their feet. Explosions and muzzle flare smeared his view. He yanked the control levers back. Metal screamed as the scout rocked in place, held for a second, and then jerked free. The controls juddered in his grip as power ran into the tracks and clawed them backwards.

The Terminators kept coming. He could see the polished iron skulls on their chests now, and the shell casings falling from their combi-bolters. Udo fired again but the shot burned wide.

Akil hit the brake on the left track. The scout twisted, skidding as the right track pulled it around. Akil rammed both levers forwards and *Talon* shot ahead. He could not see the Iron Warriors any more; the sight in front of him was a blur of cold rubble and ruins. They hit a wall and exploded through it. Udo was out of his seat, scrambling to the rear vision slits.

‘Where are they?’ shouted Akil.

‘I can’t see them.’

Akil half-twisted in his seat, instinctively looking behind. He snatched his gaze back around in time to see the remains of a fallen pillar just before they hit it.

Talon burst through the fractured plascrete, rode up and crashed down. Akil slammed forward. For a second, everything was ringing silence and the sound of his own breathing. Then he realised that they had stopped moving.

His hands went to the controls as his mouth opened. ‘Can you see th–’

The impact rang through the scout like a shattering gong. Roof plating buckled inwards. Akil could hear armour grinding on armour. Udo had curled into a ball behind his seat. Akil thought of the lightning clinging to the Terminators’ weapons.

‘Come on!’ shouted Tahirah. *Lantern* was still cold, its engine whining in protest at the speed Makis was demanding of it. Slime and mud sprayed from its tracks as it gouged a path towards the scout. Its gears screamed as it built up speed. They needed to be much, much closer for them to stand a chance of making a shot. Tahirah had ordered them on the fastest, most direct route to give it to them: straight across the sludge pan, straight towards the stranded scout and straight across the surviving Predator’s kill-zone.

Stupid, so damned stupid, Tahirah cursed inside her skull. ‘Lachlan, do you have a shot?’

‘Not a clear one.’

‘How long until you do?’

The rising growl of the engine and the rattle and ring of the *Lantern* filled the pause.

‘Five seconds, or maybe not at all.’

Tahirah looked at the auspex. On their left flank the Iron Warriors Predator had tagged them and was coming around in a wide arc, trailing its veil of heat and sensor baffling. In a few seconds it would be behind them. *Kill shot,* she thought.

'Left gunner, fire at will.' She waited, but heard no reply. 'Do you hear that, whoever the hell you are? You see a target, you fire.'

'Understood,' came a trembling reply a second later.

'Good,' she snarled, and then switched the channel. '*Silence*, this is *Lantern*.' Static boiled in her ears. 'Brel, you hear me?'

The Iron Warriors Predator almost had a shot on them. If Brel did not take care of it, they would die. She laughed to herself. It was far too late for such thoughts. There was no choice now, none at all. 'Lachlan, take the shot.'

The first Terminator reached *Talon* and pulled itself onto its roof. The Iron Warrior straightened with a clicking hiss of oiled joints and servos. No man could stand on the surface of Tallarn and hope to live, but this iron-clad creature was not a man – he was a Space Marine, and the armour that encased his flesh was made to walk through the fire of war and the cold of the void. The head of the Iron Warrior's hammer glowed with a blue light in the thick air. The legionary looked down for a second, electric green eyes taking in the scout's armour plating. He raised his hammer.

The plasma stream hit the Terminator from the side and pitched him from his feet. He twisted as he fell, his armour holding its shape for a second before melting. Chips of ceramite exploded with heat, burning the air as they fell. Inside the cage of his armour the Iron Warrior's flesh became smoke and steam.

The plasma swept on through the air, peeling paint from *Talon*'s hull in black bubbles. The Iron Warriors nearest the scout vanished as their armour crumpled under the stream and became nothing more than expanding spheres of gas and heat. Some of them remained alive long enough to turn and try to lumber out of the plasma storm, their shapes slowly deforming as they went.

Light poured through the *Talon*'s vision slits, hot white and harsh blue. The roof plating began to glow red. Akil heard the scream and rush of plasma-fuelled explosions. Static boiled and spat in his ears as the light grew brighter, shifting hue from white to orange. His hands went back to the controls and fired the scout's engines. It accelerated away over the rubble, the plasma fires burning in its wake.

Akil heard distant voices over the vox as he turned *Talon* south, away from the kill-zone.

'Put us in the kill-zone, Cal,' said Brel. There had been a pause, and Brel had not needed to see the driver's face to know that it had creased with confusion. 'Do it, Cal, put us right in the middle of it. As close to the live Predator as possible.'

As soon as Brel had seen *Lantern* move, he had realised what Tahirah was going to do, and what she was gambling on him doing. He had cursed, and for a second had thought of not giving the order. A long breath later he had shaken his head, half in anger and half in admiration.

‘Yes, boss,’ said Calsuriz, after a long pause.

Silence clattered into motion, its tracks rolling slowly, then faster and faster as it bumped onto the flat pan of the kill-zone. Brel glued his eyepieces to the periscope, flicking between infra-vision and the basic sight of the human eyeball. The fog here was thin enough that he could see the Iron Warriors tank cutting through the vapour like a shark through sand-clouded water.

‘There you are,’ he whispered. ‘Jal, make them notice us.’

The Vanquisher cannon spat fire, and a shower of mud and smoke hid the Predator for a second. When Brel saw it again it had changed course, turning hard with its dome turret traversing and its sponsons swivelling in their mounts. Damn, it was close – so close that its streaked metal hull almost filled his sight. He could see targeting lasers scatter red lines through the murk as they reached for him and the more distant *Lantern*. The Predator could do it; one machine could kill both *Lantern* and *Silence*, if it was not killed first. Tahirah had known that, had known that by roaring across the sludge pan she was opening herself up as a target, and that the only way she would live was if Brel brought the *Silence* in to split the Predator’s attention. It was a move of total courage and utter stupidity.

The Predator’s turret was rotating around to Brel. Jallinika’s curses filled his ears again as she tried to get the main gun steady for a shot. The breech slammed open next to him, and the smoking case fell from its throat. Selq was already rising, ramming another shell into position. The Vanquisher’s firing block closed on the brass-cased shell with a ring like a struck anvil.

Brel kept his eyes on the Predator. Both machines were close, far too close. This was not an engagement; it was a nose-to-nose brawl with fists of high explosive and iron. In such a fight there could be only one winner.

The diffused red line of light from the Predator’s targeter became a dot in Brel’s sight, and he knew that behind the Predator’s gun a pair of legionary eyes was looking right back at him.

‘Okay,’ whispered Brel.

Silence fired an instant after the Predator, the boom of the shot and the ring of impact overlapping in a metal-throated roar. The Predator vanished before Brel’s eyes. A second later the shards of its hull rang on *Silence*’s outer skin like the striking of a thousand hammers. Jallinika whooped, slapping the breech block. Brel stayed silent, watching the fire and smoke rising from the blasted bones of the Predator, listening.

Clatter-clunk, clatter-clatter, clatter-clunk.

‘They hit us,’ he said.

They all heard it then: a grinding whir of half-sheared metal, like the drumming of broken iron fingers upon the hull.

‘Full halt,’ said Brel, but Calsuriz had already disengaged the power from the tracks. *Silence* lurched to a stop, and the metallic clatter-clunk sound ceased. For a second none of them said anything. They all knew what had just happened. Brel took a slow breath of sterilised air.

It was Selq that broke the silence.

‘The track isn’t broken,’ he said. Brel could hear the control in the loader’s soft lilt. ‘It would have spun out or jammed if it was a straight break.’

‘It’s half broke,’ added Calsuriz, his voice casual, as though he might be talking about the chance of winning a hand of cards. ‘You can hear it scrape the skirt, and it’s not just the track. Left drive wheel is shot as well, or I’m the new Regent of Terra.’

Jallinika barked a laugh, then went quiet.

Brel let out a slow breath. There was no point asking the question that was running through all their thoughts: *Can we still move, or will we go a few metres and then be stranded?*

‘*Brel, you got it, you beautiful, beautiful bastard,*’ Tahirah’s voice breathed over the vox, and he could hear the delight at still being alive in her words. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said. *So this is how it happens,* he thought. *After all this time I am going to suffocate on the surface of a dead planet because a stray shell clipped a track*. He shook his head.

‘*Brel?*’ Tahirah’s voice crackled in his ear again, a sudden tension in her voice. ‘*We should be moving, why have you stopped?*’

He ignored the question, and flicked the vox to the internal channel only.

‘Cal, engage drive power slowly. Let’s see if we can move.’ *Or if we are dead and just haven’t stopped breathing,* he added to himself.

‘*Brel?*’ Tahirah’s voice grated in his ear again, and again he ignored it. He listened as the noise of the engine changed in pitch and the gears engaged with a *clunk*. His chest was aching, and he realised that he was holding his breath.

There was a rattling thud, and *Silence* lurched forwards. The engine noise dipped as Calsuriz notched the power down, and then there was the familiar rumble of movement. They were moving, slower than a man could walk, but moving nonetheless, and that meant they were alive.

Battle is joined on Tallarn

The first ship came alone. Tearing from the warp at the edge of the system, it sliced towards Tallarn. At first the Iron Warriors pickets presumed it was a trader or a bulk transporter unaware of the war raging at its destination. Three Iron Warriors destroyers moved to intercept it. They would board it, cripple it if they had to, and strip it of anything of value.

Only when they were within gun range did they realise they had miscalculated. The ship was no bulk carrier or lost trader. It was a warship.

The Lesson of Ages *was a brawler of a vessel, made to take damage in exchange for the destruction of its enemies. An ugly block of fire-scored armour studded by weapon barrels; it had served the Emperor since the Great Crusade had first gone beyond the light of the Solar System. Every one of its previous commanders had died in action, and the ship had been on the threshold of destruction over a dozen times. But it had never faltered, and its dedication-oaths to the Emperor remained unbroken. In reply to the Iron Warriors hails, the shipmaster sent a single message looped through all frequencies.*

'Traitor-death, traitor-death, traitor-death,' it chanted as it drove forwards.

The Iron Warriors destroyers fired, spreading torpedoes into the Lesson of Ages*'s path. But she kept coming. Warheads slammed into her decks, burning through armour in gouts of plasma and drooling molten metal into the void. Still she kept coming. Further in-system, larger ships detached from Tallarn's orbit and began the long burn to intercept this lone enemy. In the guts of the Iron Warriors vessels, ratings and servitors hauled fresh torpedoes into launch tubes. They fired again, the ordnance burning fast as it ate up the distance to the target. Fire blistered across the* Lesson of Ages*'s prow and back. Explosions shook her cracked skin. Still she kept coming.*

The Iron Warriors destroyers began to turn out of the burning ship's path. The Lesson of Ages *fired. The destroyers' shields vanished under the deluge of macro-shells an instant before their hulls melted and their reactors burst.*

Its outer hull still burning, the Lesson of Ages *roared towards Tallarn. Two hours later the second and third ships arrived – the* Lament of Caliban *and* Beastslayer *had followed the same distress call as the* Lesson of Ages. *The message had rippled through the warp from Tallarn, its meaning clear even through the fracturing of the storms.*

'The Iron Warriors are here. This is the anvil upon which we will break them.'

More would come. They came for hatred, they came for glory, but most of all they came to see the back of a traitor Legion broken.

Tallarn stood alone no longer.

FIVE

The land that will be
God-walk
Wounded

‘Do you see that?’

The words reached into the black water of Akil’s dream and pulled him to the surface. His eyelids flickered open. He had been asleep with his head resting against the vibrating hull of the scout. A sky of weeping fire filled the dreamscape through which a tattooed man walked, his multi-coloured skin crawling like a nest of snakes.

Akil had let Udo drive after he had nearly driven them into a ditch, and Udo had taken his place without a word of complaint. As soon as Akil was out of the driver’s seat the tiredness had come in a single silent wave, dragging him down into soft half-dreams. He thought he remembered trying to apologise, but he had just mumbled something incoherent and the dreams had kept coming. Now he was awake, his skin clammy against the inside of his suit, his senses trying to rebuild the world around him.

‘What?’ he said thickly, and then remembered that he needed to key his vox. ‘What did you say?’ he asked again.

He blinked. *Talon* was still, its engine silent. Udo was in the driver’s seat, leaning forward so that his eyepieces pressed against the smeared glass of the forward view slit.

‘What’s going on, why have we stopped?’

Udo did not turn away from the view.

‘We stopped an hour ago. The boss wanted to re-plot our route. Something about enemy activity between us and the shelter. The other two are just next to us.’ He turned his head, looking at Akil with eyes that caught the moonlight streaming through the vision slit.

Something is wrong, thought Akil, *something added or taken away from the way things should be.* Something that he could not place...

Udo nodded and keyed the vox. ‘Sorry to wake you, but you have to see this.’

Akil realised what was different, then.

Moonlight.

Moonlight glinted off the scratches on the gun block and drive controls. Akil scrambled forward, reaching towards the silver light as though he could touch it,

as though it were falling water. Udo moved out of the way, and Akil pushed his face against the glass and looked up. The murk was still there, hanging like a grubby veil, but he could see the moon and stars shining down on him with cold, beautiful light. He let out a long breath, closed his eyes and opened them again. He felt the smile spread across his face without being able to stop it.

‘The fog seems to be thinning in places,’ said Udo. ‘This is some plateau north-west of the shelter. We crossed into it twenty kilometres ago. Not seen a wreck or ruin since.’

Akil felt his smile stiffen, then drain away.

‘Fruit,’ he said to himself.

‘What?’

‘They grew fruit here. Kilometres and kilometres of trees and bushes. The Scented Flats, we called them, because when the blossom came the air used to be so thick with scented pollen that you could smell it all the way to the coast.’ Akil went quiet. He had brought his daughters here for the Blossom Festival just last year...

His eyes drifted down from the moon to the land laid out under its light. With the cloak of fog lifting, the sludge that had covered the ground was drying. Cracks snaked across the ground, and he saw a curl of dust rise on what must have been a gust of wind.

This is the beginning, thought Akil as the dust danced in the silver light. *No matter what happens here, no matter who wins, my world will never return. It lives only in dreams now. This drying corpse is the future. I am looking at the land that will be.*

Behind him Udo shifted, but said nothing. Akil was about to look away when he saw the first flash. He stared at the sky, blinking. For an instant he was sure he had seen...

Another flash, low on the hazed horizon, swallowed by the distant banks of fog. Then another, and another. As he looked up, fresh stars were blazing and blinking out, strobing and burning for the length of a heartbeat. The hazy sky danced with light and falling embers of fire. Akil began to speak, but the words came out as a gasp. Udo’s head came up.

‘*Are you seeing this?*’ Tahirah’s voice crackled in his ear.

‘*Yes,*’ came Brel’s voice without pause.

‘What–’ began Akil, but Brel cut through him.

‘*Orbital engagement, a big one, and it looks like a drop as well. They are hammering the hell out of each other up there to reach the surface.*’

Akil watched as a star formed and flickered from white to red.

‘But I thought we were alone,’ he said. ‘That it was just the Iron Warriors up there.’

‘*Looks like that might have changed,*’ said Brel dryly.

Akil felt something shift in his chest. It was a warm feeling, a feeling that the universe had opened an unexpected door in front of him, and that sunlight was shining through.

‘*Doesn’t mean they are coming to help us,*’ said Brel, as if he had heard the hope in Akil’s silence. ‘*Have you heard anything from command, lieutenant?*’

‘*No comms since we came out,*’ replied Tahirah, then she paused. ‘*We have to get back to the shelter. All units warm up. We move in five minutes.*’

They limped across the desiccating plain, a loose triangle of machines under the cold moonlight. They were moving at walking pace, dust rising in their wake. In front of them, looming nearer by slow paces, a bank of thick ochre fog waited like a wall separating the moonlit night from another realm.

Shut away from the moonlight, within the rattling dark of *Lantern*, Tahirah let her eyes close for a moment. They stung and ached from staring at the world through small strips of glass and targeting sights. Every now and again she would angle one of the sight blocks upwards to look at the night sky. The false stars, comets and fire lines of the space battle still fizzed across the black dome. Brel was right – whoever was up there, they were pounding the hell out of each other.

What did it mean? Reinforcements? Rescue? Withdrawal? She had heard the hope in Akil’s words when they had first seen the flashes in the sky, but as much as she wanted to believe that her first war was over, she had a feeling that Brel was closer to the mark: new stars in the sky might be ill omens as much as signs of hope.

‘We’ll be in the fog again in a few minutes,’ said Makis. ‘Did you say thirty kilometres to the shelter?’

‘Something like that.’ Tahirah shrugged even though Makis could not see her. ‘Difficult to be sure where we are. The maps are a little out of date.’

Makis did not reply. The low grumble of the machine surrounded Tahirah again, rocking her in its clattering embrace.

The fog swallowed them a few minutes later as Makis had promised. One minute it was a cliff of bulging vapour looming above them, and the next it was all around them, streaking past the glass of their periscopes, billowing like sediment stirred at the bottom of a river. Tahirah had to suppress a clench of fear in her guts. For a moment it felt as though they had plunged into deep, polluted water. She focused on the auspex to calm herself, watching the blue markers of *Talon* and *Silence* draw closer to either side of her machine. They would normally have spread out, relying on auspex and vox to stay connected, but with *Silence* hobbling on a half-broken track they stayed as close as they could.

They kept on moving for four hours. They passed along roads littered with the carcasses of vehicles, through the rusted metal ribs of buildings and past pools of

congealing slime. The clatter of their tracks and the breath of their exhausts vanished in the pus-thick vapour. No one said anything, not inside the machines and not across the vox. The only noise was the sound of the engines turning the tracks and the hiss of the air pumping into breath masks.

‘*Have to stop,*’ said Brel, and the sound of his voice made Tahirah jump.

‘Problem?’ she said. The vox crackled for a second, and then Brel’s voice came back.

‘*Track rattle has changed pitch,*’ he said, his voice thick with exhaustion.

Terra, do we all sound like that? wondered Tahirah.

‘*Might be the metal is weakening. Don’t want to push it.*’

‘Yeah,’ she said, swallowing a wave of her own tiredness. Her mouth was gritty and an ache pulsed behind her eyes. ‘Fine. Sure.’ She blinked and shook her head, trying to bring everything back into focus. *Much longer out here and we might not be able to make it back.* She thumbed the squadron-wide vox. ‘All machines, halt fifteen minutes. Cool the engines down. Keep vox and auspex live.’

Akil and Brel acknowledged, but she only half heard them. She felt herself start to sag forwards, caught herself and jerked back into her seat. She had to stay awake somehow. She tried to figure out where they were for a moment, running calculations and comparing the grim sights they had passed against the luminous maps on her command console. It did not work. She found her eyes fluttering after the second distance calculation. At least with the engine off, *Lantern* was still and quiet.

She had to stay awake...

She had...

Tahirah’s eyes opened wide and her head snapped up so fast that it slammed into the hatch above. Sharp pain burned away the after-image of a dream. Her head was pulsing with pain that was not just from hitting it. She swallowed, trying to clear a taste of bile from her mouth.

Lantern trembled.

Tahirah went still. Had that been real? It had not felt like one of the tremors which ran through the machine when it was moving. No, it felt like the ground beneath them had shaken. Slowly she turned her head to look at Lachlan. The gunner was slumped sideways, asleep, the hood of his suit riding up so that the eyepieces were pressed against his forehead. Perhaps it had not been real; perhaps it was just an echo from her dream that had yet to fade. Her head felt like someone had hammered a nail into the centre of her forehead. Carefully she thumbed the internal vox.

‘Anyone else feel that?’ No reply came. She clicked transmit again.

The tremor came again. Lachlan shifted in his sleep but did not wake.

Tahirah had already flicked on her active sight, and had her eyes pressed against the viewfinder. The world outside was as it had been: a swirling bank of fog painted in the washed-out green-white of infra-sight. Clefts opened in the murk and then closed again, like corridors glimpsed beyond briefly opened doors.

Somewhere in the distance a spot of light and heat bloomed, spreading its illumination through the fog before shrinking to nothing. A second later she heard the rumble of a detonation. She switched to normal vision. A heartbeat later an orange glow formed, strobing with secondary detentions.

Tahirah bit her lip. The explosions were distant, but they were in the direction they would have to go to get to the shelter. Orbital strikes, perhaps? Long-range artillery or macro-rocket fire? But the metal of her machine was still; something else had shaken the ground. The tremor came again, and then again, as though in answer to her thoughts. Something in the slow rhythm of it made her think of being alone in a dark forest with the sound of unseen horrors circling at the edge of sight.

'*Lieutenant.*' Brel's voice sounded tired and cold, but for some reason she had never been so pleased to hear any other. '*Did you feel that?*'

'Yes,' she said. 'There are explosions to the south-east.'

'*Could be,*' he said. Was that a note of hope in his voice?

'But the vibrations and the explosions are not synchronised.'

'*Maybe the shockwave takes longer to go through rock and earth.*'

'Maybe.' She heard the lack of conviction in her own voice. 'I think we should go cold. Full power down, sights off. No comms.'

'*What?*' said Brel, but she was already clicking another key on the vox.

'Akil, do you hear me?' She waited for a second then thumbed transmit again. 'Akil.'

'*I hear you, lieutenant.*' His voice sounded as if he was struggling to wake up.

'Good.' She keyed the squadron-wide vox again. 'All units, we are going cold and silent. Shut everything down apart from the air. I mean *everything*. Do not move, do not use anything that gives heat or uses power. Wake the vox up again in thirty, three–zero, minutes.'

She looked into her sight one last time, her hand going to the power stud.

The ground shook, and shook again.

'*Wait a second–*' Brel began, but never got to finish his protest.

The Titan strode out of the fog in front of Tahirah's eyes as if stepping from behind a curtain. Curved plates of metres-thick armour covered its shoulders, and its back seemed bent under the weight of racked missiles. Pitted orange paint lacquered its metal skin. Its arms were long-barrelled weapons. The oily skins of void shields sparkled in the fog, and electric green light burned in its eyes. Beams

of scanners swept in front of it, while pistons the width of tree trunks hissed as it took another step.

It was a god of war, an apex war machine. It was a Battle Titan, and the world shook beneath its tread.

‘*Back!*’ Tahirah felt the scream rip from her throat. Makis was shouting too, *Lantern*’s engine was roaring into full life, and the vox was crackling with the shouts of the rest of the crew. The Titan came on in unhurried strides. Fire leapt from its right arm overhead, chugging and coughing as the weapon barrels turned.

Talon screamed in protest as Akil engaged full power to its cold gears. It jumped back, tracks gouging into the ground.

‘I can’t see it!’ shouted Udo. The kid was hugging the lascannon sight, his hand on the firing lever. The ground around them erupted. The scout rose into the air and slammed back down. Yellow and red firelight flashed through the view slits, and the hull rang with the kiss of shrapnel. Akil whipped forward as *Talon* hit the ground. Pain detonated in his skull. A high-pitched buzz seemed to surround him, and warm liquid trickled down his forehead into his left eye. He reached for the control sticks, feeling their shape through his gloves even as his vision clogged and blurred. *Talon* was still moving, its tracks skidding and turning it as soon as it hit the ground. Akil rammed the right track forwards and the machine lurched around.

Outside the hull the Titan’s gun roared again, and the world quaked as though shaken by one of the old gods. He slammed *Talon* onwards, the gears screaming as they meshed at full speed.

They had seconds at best. He had heard stories of Titans, even seen a few remembrancer pict-captures of them in action. They carried enough firepower to turn a city to rubble and heat-cracked glass. *Talon* was still alive only because the god-machine had only extended a fraction of its power to kill them.

Through his blurred view he could see blue-white light strobing beyond the view slits, and hear the scream of plasma cutting through the fog. The *Lantern*’s plasma destroyer was firing up at the advancing machine. The beam of plasma hit the Titan’s first void shield and crumpled it in a wash of static. The Titan bellowed in reply, its war-horns howling above the sound of its footsteps. Its left weapon arm began to glow, lightning gathering in ribbed focusing coils. Steam began to vent along the weapon’s length.

The barrels of its right arm started to turn.

‘How long until we can fire again?’ shouted Tahirah. *Lantern* was jolting as it moved, slewing from side to side as Makis tried to make them as hard to hit as possible.

Heat fumed from the main gun. Sweat was running down the inside of Tahirah’s suit in rivulets, stinging her eyes as she tried to focus. They had taken

one of the Titan's shields down, maybe two, but they had not even touched the Titan itself.

'Sponsons fire!' Tahirah shouted, wishing she had learned the gunners' damned names.

Both sponsons fired. White bolts of energy whipped out, burning the air, spilling across the Titan's shields in rings of light. Another void shield trembled, fizzed and collapsed. The lascannons kept firing, punching into the next layer. She watched the Titan's gatling weapon building ponderous speed as it turned, while the plasma weapon on its other arm was breathing heat and sparks into the fog as its power built.

'Fire main gun!'

'Not yet.'

'Now, or we won't get a chance.'

Lachlan cursed, and pushed the firing stud. The beam of plasma shrieked from the gun's throat even as it overheated. Scalding gas vented from the breech block next to Lachlan, spilling over the shielding plates in terrifying, neon clouds. Lachlan screamed as the gas enveloped him, his enviro-suit melting to his skin, his lungs blistering in the heat. Alarms wailed.

Tahirah kept her eyes on the Titan as emergency coolant frosted the inside of the turret. The plasma stream hit the Titan's shields and blew them out one after another. Exotic energy discharged in a peal of false thunder and a sheet of lightning.

Then the flash faded and the image of the Titan returned, standing still, stripped of its cloak of shields. For a second the god in iron stood naked under her gaze.

'Sponsons fire,' she said, but she knew it was too late. The Titan strode towards her, closing the distance with steps that cratered the ground. The angry light around the god-machine's plasma destructor was a forged-steel red. She could almost hear the power in the weapon roaring to be free.

The Titan's weapon fired at the exact moment the shell hit it from the side.

A jagged star of light formed where the left arm had been, and then shattered. The fog flashed white. The Titan staggered. Blast shields blinked shut over its eye ports. Fire spilled up its body from the remains of its arm, and debris rained to the ground. Its armour rippled with heat, shedding burnt flakes of paint. The god-machine's great flat head dipped, and then shook like a fighter recovering from a heavy punch. Burning oil and sparks bled from cracks in its armour, and pain growled from half-melted war-horns. Then the head rose, and the Titan straightened with a shriek of heat-warped gears.

It opened fire. Shells tore from its remaining arm, churning the ground in front of it and filling the air with the thunder of its rage.

Lantern shook like a matchbox dancing in a hailstorm.

‘*Go,*’ said Brel in Tahirah’s ear. For a second she felt that it was a cool breath of calm cutting through the fury. ‘*You hear me. Take your machines and run.*’

Her entire world was vibration and noise.

‘You–’ she began, but the shouted words vanished into the roar of explosions.

‘*Our track’s broken, Tahirah,*’ said Brel, as if he were pointing out an obvious but easily overlooked fact of life. ‘*Broken properly. That Titan will kill anything that remains here. There is no coming out of this. Not for us.*’

Even wrapped in the oven heat of her tank, the words sent a shiver over Tahirah’s skin when she realised Brel had never used her proper name before.

‘*Run,*’ he said again, and the vox cut out.

For a second Tahirah said nothing. She felt her heart beat once and the shells shake the ground in answer.

‘Ready?’ said Brel. He did not look at the rest of his crew. Not at Jallinika, crammed close to him in the turret. Not at Selq, crouching in the space beneath his feet. Not at Calsuriz, who had pulled his bulk out of the driving seat and was crouched next to the frontal lascannon.

He did not need to look at them to know that they would be where they needed to be. They had all heard what he had said to Tahirah; he had opened the transmission to the internal vox. None of them had said anything when he told the lie. The inside of *Silence* was ringing with the noise of explosions. The sound seemed to fade until it was the slow deep surge of the sea on the world he had left long ago, the only world he had called home.

‘No way we could have run with a broken track anyway,’ said Jallinika. Brel glanced at her, and then away. He nodded once.

So this is how it really does end, he thought. *This is what I was trying to dodge and outrun all this time. I really am a fool.*

‘Okay,’ he said, and nodded again. He did not need to look into the sight again to know where the enemy was. The grinding crash of its wounded steps rang through the hull.

A red light lit on his command console. A scanning array had touched them; the Titan had seen them.

‘Fire!’ he shouted.

Silence spoke for the last time, and the god it had wounded answered in kind.

Anarchy. No other word could sum up the first loyalist reinforcement of Tallarn. The ships that had swarmed to Tallarn's aid brought remnants of Legion strike forces, Imperial Army grand cohorts, Titan battle groups and countless other divisions.

But they brought no single commander to marshal their efforts. In the void, hundreds of ships fought to reach the planet. Landing craft died and fell through Tallarn's deadly air. On the surface, dozens of fractured commands contested against each other even as they fought the enemy. Who had authority over whom? What was the plan? What should they do? No single command had brought them to Tallarn, so there was no single answer.

In the end it was their numbers that saved the loyalists from disaster. Through chance they had approached Tallarn from every segment of the system sphere, and at broken intervals. Most of all, they arrived in huge numbers – lone ships, squadrons and ragged fleets, they came like carrion feeders to a corpse. With no unified plan of attack, they all did the simplest thing that they could: they fought to pour troops onto Tallarn's surface.

Many died, but the Iron Warriors could not stop them all.

The light of battle ringed Tallarn. Ships spun and hammered one another, jostling to reach low orbit or firing upon those who had already begun to dump troops and materiel onto the surface. Some had not realised that the planet's atmosphere was lethal; the first transports to crash into the sludge oceans filled with the liquefied corpses of their crew taught a swift lesson to the rest. At Tallarn's northern polar region, the ships under Admiral Phoroc established geostationary orbit above the Cobalack shelter, and began to shuttle materiel down to the mountain plateau. On the plains of Khedive, the transports of the Legio Gryphonicus landed upon the black crusted earth. Above them, visible through the gaps their descent had cut in the fog, ships fired and bled and burned. Around the Sapphire City, landers homed in on signals from the shelter beneath, and dumped hundreds of fresh war machines to link up with the survivors.

In response, the Iron Warriors began to pour more of their own forces onto Tallarn.

SIX

The might of ages
Marks
Execution

‘This is not real,’ said Tahirah. Beside her Akil shook his head but said nothing. The cavern chamber extended away from them, its limits lost in a haze of engine heat and exhaust fumes. She took a slow breath, and the smell of metal, fuel and hot engines filled her throat. She coughed, feeling her eyes sting and water. She blinked to clear her sight, and for a moment she wondered if she would open her eyes and find herself back inside the metal cocoon of her machine.

Tanks. Hundreds – no, *thousands* – of tanks filled the chamber. She recognised the turrets of Punishers, the long barrels of Vanquishers, and the wedge-shaped hulls of Malcadors beside dozens more she could not name. The dappled colours of a hundred regiments covered their hulls, and the men and women that worked on each machine wore uniforms that spoke of worlds spread far beyond Tallarn. The sound of engines, shouted orders and the ring of metal upon metal filled her ears in a grinding tide.

It was not just an army: it was a host readying for war. And it was not alone; this scene was being repeated in every cavern beneath the Sapphire City.

What remained of Tahirah’s squadron had reached the shelter two hours earlier. The last few kilometres had been less a dash and more of a slither. *Lantern* and *Talon* had inched past half-glimpsed shapes in the fog, winding their course around the light of distant explosions. Tahirah had realised then what the lights in the sky had meant. The Iron Warriors had descended to Tallarn’s surface in a strength she had never dreamed that they might possess.

She had glimpsed a clutch of landing craft briefly through a break in the fog. The might of ages had poured onto Tallarn: walking war machines, mobile artillery platforms and slab-hulled tanks. Even the half-living creatures of the Cybernetica stalked from the ships, like statues cast in clockwork and steel. Tahirah had watched the enemy until they passed out of her sight, and wondered if she would find the Sapphire City shelters already cracked open and dead.

She had not. Instead she had found them ringed with armour and filled with weapons of war.

Almost unable to walk, their eyes bloodshot and their skin raw from days in their suits, Tahirah’s remaining crew had passed through decontamination to find

the shelter filled with a whirl of activity. Tens of thousands of men and women moved through the chambers and corridors. It had been too much for some. Vail had just slumped to the floor, his back against the wall, and shaken his head. Udo had begun to grin and babble. Tahirah herself had not said a word, but had just stood for a full five minutes watching the flow of people. Then she had started to walk. Akil had followed her, silent and wide-eyed.

They had slipped down the bustling corridors, drawing looks as they failed to salute. At last they had reached the cavern where, all those months ago, she and her crew had skidded the tank across the bare plascrete.

And there she had seen why the Iron Warriors had come to the surface for them now. It was not just because Tallarn had been reinforced. It was because from that moment on, this war would no longer be weighted in the Legion's favour.

'Space Marines,' said Akil in a low voice, and Tahirah followed his gaze to where half a dozen figures stood beside three enclosed speeders. Their armour was white, but chipped and scarred so that the grey ceramite showed beneath the paint. Jagged crimson patterns were splashed across their greaves, pauldrons and helmets, and hanks of black horsehair woven with bones swung from their belts as they moved.

And how they moved. Tahirah found she was thinking of how snakes glided over the ground – fluid and unhurried, yet ready to strike. One of them had his head bared, and turned to face her. Eyes the blue of cold skies met Tahirah's stare.

In that second she wanted to run, to bury herself behind plasteel and rockcrete. She jerked her gaze away from the Space Marine's.

'What happens now?' asked Akil from beside her.

She did not reply, but reached into the pocket of her fatigues and pulled out a lho-stick. Carefully she put it between her lips and clicked an igniter until it produced a blue cone of flame. Her hair was plastered to her scalp, the locks sheened with grease. Dirt had gathered in the creases of her face. A raw mark from her collar seal ran around her neck like the imprint of a shackle. She noticed that her hands were steady, but the glowing tip of the lho-stick trembled as it burned. She met her own eyes in the fingerprint-smeared mirror of the igniter's case. Hardness and tiredness looked back at her. She thought of Brel.

Light of Terra. I look like him, now.

She closed her eyes, and inhaled the smoke.

'Tahirah?' said Akil.

She felt the moisture on her cheeks.

What is going on? she thought. She opened her eyes.

Tears were rolling down her face, smearing the grime into streaks. They did not feel like they belonged to her.

Her throat tightened. She felt the tremors begin to run through her, and she clamped down on the memories that were bubbling up inside. She breathed deeply until the tears stopped. Akil said nothing, and she did not look at him. She did not want to, just in case she saw tears in his eyes too. In her still blurred vision, the gathered rows of machines looked like frozen waves in an ugly iron sea. A metre from her, a soldier in blue fatigues was feeding chains of rounds into an ammo hopper. Further away, a girl – no, not a girl, a soldier – was laughing as she swung down from the turret of a Vanquisher.

‘Lachlan died when we were almost here.’

‘I know,’ said Akil gently. ‘I saw you take him out of the machine.’

She was really shaking now. The world beyond her eyes was a smudged blur.

Akil’s voice came again, low and measured. ‘Tahirah, it’s not your fault.’

‘It *was* my fault. I ordered him to fire. I knew what might happen, that the gun might overheat.’ She paused and blinked. ‘He moaned for hours. I just wanted him to be quiet. His suit was breached, you see, so we could hear. Part of me kept wanting him to be quiet. But he kept moaning. I thought he was trying to say someone’s name. Then he was quiet, and...’ She felt a bitter laugh come from behind her teeth. ‘And I was relieved. For a moment, I was relieved.’

Akil said nothing, and when she looked at him he was looking down at his left hand as though he did not want to meet her eye. She was suddenly aware of how old he must be – he had daughters, he had said. She wondered how old they had been.

The memory of Akil’s question drifted into her mind. *What happens now?* Slowly she got control of herself, composure forming like armour. She stopped shaking, feeling the ball of memories and emotions scratching against the inside of the door she had just closed on them.

‘Now, Akil,’ she began, as if he had only just asked the question. She forced dead calm and control into each word. Akil looked up at her, and she caught a flash of something in his eyes as she spoke. ‘Now it happens all over again.’

Akil let the flow of bodies carry him through the shelter. They pressed close to him, jostling him, shoving past on their way to wherever they were going. None of them looked at him, except perhaps with a glance that asked who this unwashed and bearded man was who was blocking their way. He did not mind, in fact he liked it: just walking, not deciding where to go, letting his mind drift with his feet. Occasionally he even felt as though he was walking through the tangled streets of his youth, hearing the cries of the sellers and the raised voices as they argued a price.

He smiled. An officer in an azure field cap caught the expression and must have thought he was mocking him, because Akil saw the man’s forehead crease and his mouth open. Akil saluted, bobbing his head respectfully, and passed on.

He did not know where he was going, but that was all right. For now it was the best he could hope for.

‘Akil Sulan.’

He only half heard the voice the first time, and did not bother to look around. Akil Sulan was no one now – just another raider, another body for the battle of Tallarn. The world where that name had meant something was gone. No, the voice calling his name had been just a trick of his hearing, a half-familiar sound spat out of the noise of dozens of voices and hurrying feet.

‘You are Akil Sulan.’

The voice was just behind him this time, and he felt a hand upon his shoulder. His own hand moved to where he still carried his dagger.

‘No, no, my friend,’ said the voice, now just beside his ear. It was a soft voice that purred with the accents of Tallarn’s southernmost city state. He felt a blade point as it pricked the skin above his right kidney. ‘I mean you no harm, honoured worthy, but you must come with me.’

Akil felt a hollow void open in the base of his thoughts.

Honoured worthy. No one had called him that since the night the bombardment had started.

‘Who are you?’ he managed to say. Around him the crowd of soldiers, acolytes and servitors moved on, unseeing and uncaring.

‘A servant of a friend, honoured worthy. He wishes to see you again.’ Akil felt the pressure behind the knife tip shift to the space under his left arm as the grip on his shoulder loosened. A man stepped from behind him, so that he was close by Akil’s left side. A hand draped around Akil’s shoulders as if they were old comrades. The knife would be invisible to anyone who looked at them. Akil could not hide the shock on his face as he looked at the man.

He wore a deep red uniform crossed with black frogging, and pinned with silver rank bars. A broad, clean-shaven face smiled at Akil from beneath a peaked cap.

‘Forgive the blade, but my service to our mutual friend means that I cannot allow you to refuse this request.’ The man’s accent had suddenly changed: it was hard and crisp, all traces of the southern accent gone. Akil could smell a touch of liqueur and rich smoke on the man’s breath, as if he might have just come from an officers’ card table.

Akil’s mind was whirling, his fatigue and shock blending and blurring. The months in the shelter, or inside the hull of *Talon*, seeing the world above, killing and trying to forget... it all fell into the growing dark within him. In his memory, he saw Jalen standing on the balcony beside him as night fell for the last time over the Sapphire City.

‘Things will change, honoured Sulan,’ Jalen had said, and the emerald lizards tattooed across his face had seem to squirm. *‘You need to accept that before you take another step.’*

‘I understand,’ Akil had said, and turned to look the man in the eye. *‘What do you require of me?’*

The memory faded, but the tattooed face lingered as he looked at the man in the red officer’s uniform.

‘Jalen,’ he said.

The man who looked like an officer smiled and nodded. ‘He is close. Come with me.’

The room was small, no more than a box of bare plascrete hidden behind a small door at the end of a quiet passage, as if it had been made to be forgotten. Harsh light filled the space from a single lumen orb that hung from a chain in the ceiling. A trio of plasteel crates rested upon the floor, their edges scuffed and their tops covered in a thick layer of dust. The room smelled of dust too – dust and stale air. Akil took in everything with a glance and turned back to the man in the red officer’s uniform.

‘Wait here,’ said the man, and pulled the bare metal door shut.

Akil let out a breath, and pressed his fingers against his eyes. His hands trembled against his eyelids. He tried to steady his thoughts, to decide what he was going to do.

‘Hello, my friend.’

Akil’s eyes snapped open.

The man who stood inside the closed door gave a friendly smile and a small bow. He was tall, and looked to be well into middle age, but the green eyes still spoke of years lived that did not show on his face. The oil-stained overalls of a low-level menial hung from the man’s lean frame, the sleeves rolled up to show thin but muscular arms. His hairless head gleamed in the light. The smile still clung to the man’s lips as he took a step forward.

‘Jalen,’ said Akil.

‘It is good to see you,’ said Jalen. His voice was rich, calm and unhurried. ‘I am sorry. It must be something of a shock. I apologise. I have been... here for a while, but I thought it best that our paths did not cross. After all, things have changed since we last met.’

Akil just stared at Jalen. He thought of the two of them looking out over the Sapphire City, of the last light of the sun catching the sides of the buildings and turning the distant sea to the blue of midnight. Jalen nodded as if he were remembering the same moment.

‘Much has changed, but we two still remain,’ said Jalen, and as he spoke, coloured patterns appeared on his skin, spreading and growing like ivy choking a

sunlit wall. Emerald lizards crawled over his neck and face, their bodies, tail and legs interlocking without a gap. Turquoise feathers enfolded his forearms, as delicate spirals in red and black unfolded over his palms and wound up his fingers. Jalen's smile cracked the tattooed jungle of his face.

Akil felt pain in his chest. He sucked down a breath, and the rage filled him, hot and acidic. His hands came up, and suddenly the smooth skin of Jalen's neck was in his hands, and he was ramming the tattooed man back against the wall, and squeezing, and squeezing.

Then his hands were empty, and he was spinning and falling, and he could not breathe. He hit the floor, and felt what little breath was in his lungs burst from his mouth. He rolled and gasped. Jalen was standing over him, looking down, hands loose by his sides.

'You should have tried the blade,' said Jalen, and lifted a hand to show a knife held in his left hand. Subtle waves ran through the polished curve of the blade, and the dark wooden hilt glinted with inlaid silver. It was Akil's knife, the knife his grandfather had given him, the knife he carried even when inside his machine. Jalen held the blade up, his eyes flickering down its length until they met Akil's stare. 'If you mean to kill someone, do it with one blow. Is that not what they say here?'

Akil fought against the pain in his chest. The rage was still there, binding with the pain until they were almost one. He rolled to his knees and sucked a ragged gulp of air.

'You killed my world,' he gasped and tried to stand.

'No.' Jalen shook his head as he sat on one of the metal crates. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, hands held together loosely. Akil's knife had vanished. 'No, we did not.'

Akil felt his heart hammering in his chest. He thought of going for the door, of screaming that an enemy infiltrator was inside the shelter. Then he thought of the man in the red officer's uniform, the man whose voice had changed so smoothly.

He looked up now at the man who had promised to save Tallarn from its slow death. Jalen looked back – calm, impassive, waiting.

Akil turned his head away, remembering the slow dread building inside him as he had watched Tallarn fade from prosperity, its sheen of wealth sustained by habit and the dwindling fat of past fortune. The Imperium had raised them up, and then had turned its face away, uncaring of what the future held for those who had served it.

Then the war between Horus and the Emperor had begun, but it had not touched Tallarn. The future of his world, of his daughters' world, had seemed just as bleak as before. Then, just when Akil could see nothing ahead but the cold blackness of despair, Jalen had found him and offered some hope.

Akil turned and looked up at the off-worlder's green eyes. He sucked in a deep breath and spat. Jalen shook his head slowly.

'I never lied to you. The things we talked of, the plans we made – all were true. We wanted to restore Tallarn, to save it from the gradual decline you knew was coming. We wanted to give it back its future.'

Akil pushed his hands down, trying to get more air, trying to rise, trying to get up and take Jalen's neck. He would kill him, here and now. He began to rise, limbs shaking.

'Listen to me, Akil,' said Jalen, raising his hands, palms open. 'Listen to me. This was not our doing.'

Cramped pain flared across Akil's torso as he tried to straighten, failed and dropped back to one knee. Air panted between his bared teeth. He squeezed his eyes shut, his forehead beaded with sweat. Slowly he felt the pain in his chest unlock, but still he did not move.

'*Why?*'

The word formed on his lips before he could bite it back, and he realised that it was the question he had been asking without hope of answer ever since the Iron Warriors had murdered his world.

'Why, Jalen? We were close. Another few months and the Governor would have fallen. You said that there would be no war, that the Warmaster wanted Tallarn whole again. I believed that. Every coin I spent to buy the ear of the other cities, every name I passed you, everything was because I believed it. I believed the Warmaster would save us.'

Jalen shook his head, sorrow creasing the tattoos around his eyes.

'Akil–'

'There is nothing left!' roared Akil. He gulped a breath, and felt the tears on his face. 'There is nothing left.'

'You will not believe me, I can see that, but I tell you truly that we had no hand in what was done here. Others acted in a way that we had not anticipated. But you are still here, and so are we, and there is something that you can do to save Tallarn's future, Akil.' He paused and Akil looked up to see that the sorrow had faded from Jalen's eyes. 'There is *something* left.'

Akil shook his head, but coldness had spread through him at Jalen's words.

'What could you possibly–'

'Your daughters, Akil. Both of them alive and well, and hoping that you are too.'

Akil said nothing. He could say nothing. Voices spiralled through his thoughts.

Let it be true. Please let it be true. No, it cannot be. Oh Terra, where are they...? Can they be alive? Is it a trick, a lie? How is this possible?

Jalen tilted his head, as though he were listening. Then he reached into a thigh pocket and pulled out a battered data-slate, and keyed it to wakefulness. The screen was cracked and smeared with fingerprints, but the images that moved across its surface held Akil still: two small faces framed by curls of black hair, dark eyes wide and wary. As Akil looked, one glanced at the other as if for reassurance.

Mina, he thought. *It is all right, it will be all right*. He felt his eyes sting and his throat lock.

'You see,' said Jalen softly. In the screen a tattoo-covered hand extended into the image, palm up as if asking for something. Akil watched as Emerita nodded to her sister, and Mina placed a small strip of woven fabric in the tattooed palm. The hand withdrew and the image cut out.

Akil looked up at Jalen. The tattooed man was holding out an open hand. The red, orange and blue threads were worn, and the edges frayed, but the colours were still as bright as the day he had last seen it flicking around at the end of Mina's braid. He reached out and took the small piece of fabric, and stared at it for a long moment. When he looked up, he could feel the coldness spreading under his skin once more. It took him a second to speak.

'What do you want from me?'

Jalen nodded without smiling, his face without expression.

'In seventeen minutes, all units in this shelter will be called to deploy in the world above. They will join those already ringing the entrances. The Iron Warriors and their allies have come in force. They mean to break the armies that have come to your aid, then to break open this shelter and make it their own – their first fortress from which to fight the rest of this battle.'

'The rest of the battle?'

'Yes. The forces that now fill your shelter, and war in the skies above, are just the beginning. More will come, and more still to aid the Iron Warriors. More and more flesh and iron poured onto this world, until it is choked and both sides have nothing more to give and no more blood left to spill.'

Akil snorted and shook his head. 'Is that what you want to happen, or what you fear?'

'Very good, very good,' said Jalen. A sudden smile sent the lizards squirming over his cheeks. 'I should have remembered the reasons we came to you. You always were clever, Akil, but now you must listen.'

Jalen's face was no longer smiling – his expression was hard, his eyes unblinking. Akil felt as though he could not look away from the face that suddenly seemed something very far from friendly.

'In the battle to come, you will receive a signal with a single word. When you hear that word you must let the forces that are approaching you at that time pass.

No harm will come to you, but they must pass.’

‘Pass... and reach the shelter?’ Akil paused, and Jalen inclined his head. ‘What will happen then?’

‘You will run, and live again, and so will your daughters.’

‘How could they find me in the middle of a battle?’

Jalen’s eyes seemed to sparkle. ‘They will find you.’

Akil let out a breath. He wanted to close his eyes, to fall back into the soft world of sleep and dreams, in which the path in front of him did not exist – a world where this choice was not his to make. The woven threads brushed his skin as he moved his hand.

A choice, said a voice from the cold core of his mind. *There never was a choice.*

‘What will the word in the signal be?’

‘Salvation.’

Jalen stood, handed Akil back his knife, and raised the palm of his left hand. The swirls and patterns of the tattoos caught the hazy glow of the light. Akil had a momentary impression of feathers and scales, and then a new pattern spread across Jalen’s palm in luminous green: two lines joined to form a triangle without a base. Reptilian heads and serpentine necks coiled around the symbol, their eyes and scales shimmering with cold light.

Akil hesitated, then raised his left hand and felt his own palm tingle as the electoo lit for only the second time in his life. Jalen closed his palm and gave a small bow. The tattooed patterns drained from his skin as he turned and stepped towards the door.

‘Do not worry, my friend,’ said Jalen, his hand on the door latch. ‘You are on the right side.’

Sound filled the cavern. It billowed into the air from ten thousand engines, and rattled with hatches locking shut. It grew like the waking growl of a vast beast made of metal and turning gears.

Tahirah ran through the growing swell of sound. She dodged loading servitors, and ran down the fume-filled corridors between tanks. She had been asleep when the deployment order had begun blaring from the vox-system. The contents of a bottle had been helping her not to dream; they had not done a good job. She had awoken thinking that it was happening again, that the bombs were falling and that the killing fog would fill the shelter. Then she had recognised the full alert signal and laughed to herself.

It *was* happening all over again, just in a different way.

A Malcador heavy tank began to grind backwards as she ran past it, almost catching her under its tracks. She swore at its metal back and kept moving. She was tired, so damned tired – tired enough to just stop and let whatever would

happen be. But she ran anyway, pulling the seals on her enviro-suit shut, looking for the *Lantern* amongst the ranks of machines.

Every tank that could turn a track or wheel was scrambling to deploy. There were to be no exceptions, and if she was not there then *Lantern* would roll into the world above without her. She would not let that happen. No matter how tired she felt, no matter how much she thought that most of the machines here would end up as coffins for their crews, still she would not leave her machine and crew to go to war without her.

‘Tahirah!’

She twisted, looking for a familiar face. Udo stood half out of *Lantern*’s turret hatch, the hood and mask of his enviro-suit hanging down his chest like flayed skin. A grin spread across his unshaven face.

‘Why on Terra are you smiling?’

Udo looked puzzled for a moment, and the grin faltered. ‘Sorry, boss,’ he muttered. She had a feeling she knew why he was with *Lantern* rather than with Akil and *Talon*. She shook her head – her eyes felt gritty with incomplete sleep and going too far down the bottle to get there. ‘Just good to know you’re coming out with us,’ he said.

She ignored the remark, and clambered onto the top of her machine. Its camouflage scheme was long gone, stripped by decontamination and the air of the world above. A patina of dull colours and chips now covered *Lantern*’s hull like stains on a butcher’s apron. The main gun was cool and silent, the length of its outer cowling scorched black from the weapon’s own heat.

‘Out of the turret,’ she said to Udo, with a jerk of her head. He opened his mouth and took a breath to speak. She really did not want this, not now. Not ever, in fact.

‘You... you need a new gunner.’

‘One of the sponson gunners will take the main gun.’

‘They haven’t got a clue, Tah.’

‘It’s *Lieutenant Tahirah*,’ she spat. ‘And before you point out more of the blindingly obvious – yes, I know that it will leave me with one sponson down, but you seem keen to leave Akil with no gunner at all, so get out of my machine and get to your own.’

‘He’s not here, Tah– *lieutenant*.’

‘What?’

Udo shrugged. ‘Akil. I haven’t seen him for hours.’

Tahirah just looked at him for a second. *What the hell was she supposed to do now? A squadron of one? Great, just great.* High above her a muster horn sounded into the cavern. The lights began to pulse, turning everything to a strobing yellow twilight. Hatches clattered shut across a field of tanks.

‘Lieutenant.’

She looked around. Akil was standing next to *Lantern*’s left flank. He was panting, sweat beading his forehead. His enviro-suit looked as if he had rushed to pull it on as he ran. That almost made her laugh. Udo’s shoulders slumped.

‘Both of you, get to your machine, and get ready to move.’

Udo did not argue.

She swung up onto *Lantern*’s turret and dropped inside. The rest of the crew were already there, compulsively checking equipment. She reached up to pull the hatch down, then paused. For a second she saw the cavern laid out before her: the blunt shapes of war machines waiting under the pulsing light and the blare of the horns. The machines nearest the doors started their engines, and the rumble of them rose in a chorus. Fumes belched from exhausts. For a long moment Tahirah just watched, waiting until the warning lights around the outer doors turned to green. Then she pulled the hatch shut and *Lantern* was her entire world once again.

The Iron Warriors burned the remains of the Sapphire City before their assault. Fire fell from the sky, salted from the ships in orbit high above. Flames rolled through the skeletons of buildings, gathering small cyclones of heat around themselves as they fed. Phosphex flowed down streets, eating through stone and iron with a crackling hunger. Hammer blows of ordnance reduced buildings to rubble even as they burned. The light of the flames turned the smoke and fog into sheets of blood-red and pus-yellow.

The ships stopped firing, and for a moment the corpse of the Sapphire City was allowed simply to burn. Then the long-range guns took up the beat, and the dead city shook again as the Iron Warriors advanced from the coastal plain.

Mountains rose to the north of the advancing host, their tops lost in the fog. On their southern flank, the sludge-clotted ocean sat like a black mirror. The Iron Warriors came in clusters and waves, a grinding tide of iron thirty kilometres wide and a hundred deep.

The siege engines were the first to enter the dead city. Block-hulled machines, with skirts of riveted ceramite, ground the rubble to powder under their tracks. Wide-mouthed guns jutted from their hulls and turrets, and armoured dozer blades shunted rubble aside as though it were freshly fallen snow. They crossed into the maze of rubble-choked roads and shattered buildings, auspex sifting the ruins for their enemy. Splinters of stone pattered on their hulls as the dust of the bombardment settled. The crews of these behemoths were not the Iron Warriors, though they bore the marks of service to Perturabo and his sons. They pressed forward for ten metres, a hundred metres, two hundred metres... and still nothing. Signals flickered between the advancing machines: had anyone seen anything?

Why were there no wrecks? Perhaps the bombardment had already destroyed the enemy?

The 17th Company of the 81st Galibed Oathsworn had served beside the Iron Warriors for two decades. It had been their machines that had advanced into the fury of the Laccomil Gap on Tarnic IV, and Perturabo himself had ordered the company reborn after its death on Necibis. Now they advanced at the tip of the first wave – thirty Malcador, Demolisher and Thunderer siege tanks in coal-black. The Oathsworn had passed through five kilometres of silent cityscape when they became the first true casualties of the battle.

On a gully floor that had once been the city's widest road, a line of green light flicked out from ruins to the side of the Oathsworn column. The luminous beam touched the hull of a Demolisher tank and burrowed into its heart. The tank vanished, its hull exploding outwards in a ragged cloud. The two machines to either side of it flipped over like tossed playing cards. The beam of green light disappeared, and then flicked out again. Another tank vanished.

Inside the advancing Oathsworn vehicles, auspex screens began to light with heat and energy blooms. The siege tanks began to fire, coughing fat shells into the ground in front of them. More fire came from amongst the ruins as the hidden tanks of the defenders came to life and fired.

Across the width of the city, from north to south, the defenders emerged from their prepared ambush sites. Hundreds of tanks died in moments, their hulls punctured or split by explosions. More defenders emerged from the maze of ruins to kill and kill again. To the south, in the water-choked ruins along the coast, walking machines of the Mechanicum pulled themselves from drowned tunnels. Twice the height of men but without flesh or faces, they stalked through the ruins, lightning reaching from their weapon arms to crawl across tank hulls and cook the crews inside.

For a moment, the invaders' advance faltered. Then a second wave of attackers broke over the first.

The defenders who had survived the bombardment died then. They died in fire, their hulls holed through, their bodies blown into rags of skin and meat. They died in the gaps between heartbeats, their ears ringing with the bellow of shell impacts. They died thinking a thousand thoughts of home, and faces they would never see again.

Akil felt the shaking blows of falling shells as *Talon* crested the ramp's edge. To either side of him, more machines poured out from the protection of the earth. Fragments of light and colour flashed through the view slits: columns of fire illuminating the fog, lighting up the black bones of buildings. Everything was shaking. His mouth was paper dry, the rubber smell of the suit thick in his throat.

‘Watch out!’ screamed Udo, and Akil just had time to yank *Talon* to one side before it rammed into the machine in front.

He cursed. Tanks were pouring from the shelter entrance so close together that it was like a herd of cattle jostling at a field gate. Shells exploded amongst them, flipping their hulls over and leaving wide craters in the ground. Akil pushed *Talon* forwards, keeping the shape of *Lantern* in his view. He could barely see where he was going, and the general vox was a wall of incoherent noise.

This is not a battle, he thought. *It is a riot*. He keyed the squadron frequency.

‘Where the hell are we going?’ he shouted into the vox.

‘*Two kilometres out, then halt,*’ came Tahirah’s voice. ‘*We are forming a line to the south-east to meet the enemy before they can reach the central shelter entrances. The same is happening to shield the northern and southern entrances.*’

‘That’s it?’

‘*That’s all the commanders could agree between them, so that’s the plan. That’s what the hidden units on the surface bought us – time to get out and form a line across the city.*’

Akil shook his head. ‘How many enemy are there?’

‘*I don’t know. Ten thousand? Fifty?*’

‘And we are just going out to meet them?’

‘*What choice do we have? If they reach the entrances, they will burn through, and then we have no hope.*’ Her voice cracked, and he could hear the exhaustion through the vox-distortion. ‘*Winning is the only way we have to live.*’

Akil said nothing, and after a moment keyed the vox off.

The Iron Warriors hit the defenders around the northern shelter entrance in a wedge of three hundred machines. At its tip, seven Fellblades punched into the still forming lines of defenders like a mailed fist into flak board. A few defenders had tried to stand before the super-heavy tanks, their guns firing at the huge machines. Accelerator cannons answered, punching shells through buildings and armour. Black clouds of smoke thumped into the air, flattening and splitting to show the red fire within.

The lesser Iron Warriors machines followed, killing the half-dead and the crippled. Vindicators and mortar carriers lobbed shells in front of the column’s advance, the overlapping explosions unfolding like scattered flowers.

The loyalist line buckled. Machines still exiting the northern shelter entrance met machines pulling back from the Iron Warriors advance. A tangle of machines formed for a kilometre around the entrance.

In the south of the city, the Titans advanced with the Iron Warriors forces: two battle groups clad in black iron and scorch-streaked orange, striding through the murk, their void shields shimmering with the rain patter of fire. Every few moments all the Titans would seem to pause, and then they would fire as one:

lines of white-hot energy cracked the ground, and torrents of shells and missiles fell like rain at the edge of a storm cloud. Their advance had been resisted, but they had obliterated all who stood against them. As the dust of their latest salvo settled, the Titans bellowed their mechanical war cries across the burning ruins.

Then the first of the towering machines broke from the pack.

Sunderer loped down the shore line, its splayed toes sinking into the sludge and slime. It was a Warhound, the smallest of its breed, but no less a god of destruction for that. A hundred metres behind, its twin followed, head and weapons swaying with its accelerating strides. They had already taken their first kills: a maniple of Cyberneticae, and a squadron of dirty-hulled battle tanks. They had been easy prey, nothing of note to machines of their kind.

Within *Sunderer*'s head, the crew listened to the signals boil out of the city. Thousands of the reinforcement vehicles had gathered in the Sapphire City to defend a shelter hidden beneath the ruins. It did not matter; victory was simply a matter of time.

Without warning, a stuttering line of fire rose from amongst the ruins and struck *Sunderer*. The Warhound's void shields burst and explosive shells hammered into its head. The Titan shook its skull like a dog trying to shake a swarm of fire-wasps from its fur and, half blinded, fired back. Plasma and bolt-shells spat from its weapons and churned the ruins around it to dust and glowing vapour.

*Sunderer'*s attackers fired again, just once. The volcano cannon beam punched through its lupine skull in a shriek of vaporised metal.

The Warhound fell with a roar of shearing metal and unwinding gears.

The last transmission sent by its princeps was a warning to its kin.

'*Shadowswords!*' the signal screamed, but by then another god of metal was already falling.

Tahirah felt her eyelids start to drift shut. Nothing moved in the plaza. Edged by the mounds of rubble, the paving stones had been cracked and blackened by shell fire, but it still felt like a circle of calm in the chaos that boiled around them. Here, they were the line, the defence that stood against the enemy advance, but if it had not been for the din of the vox and the explosions lighting the fog in the distance she would have thought that they were alone. Adrenaline had faded soon after they had reached their assigned position, leaving fatigue to hang heavily upon her.

Terra, I just want to sleep, she thought. Beside her, Vail tried to stretch in the unfamiliar main gunner's seat. A few minutes earlier, a mortar shell had fallen into the plaza. The dull crack had startled them all, but nothing had followed the shell.

Somewhere to the north, the Iron Warriors were pushing hard. The south was holding, and the centre seemed almost forgotten. At least that was what she could tell from the vox. The war was definitely out there, though – the fog fizzed with its light, and its fury trembled through her flesh, but it was all far from here. Looking out at the still plaza, she felt as if she were an insect caught beneath an upturned glass.

'*Anything?*' Akil's voice clicked over the vox.

'Nope,' she replied. She was looking at the plaza through a sight block on top of the turret. The view was unaugmented, but that did not matter; there was nothing to see. *Lantern* and *Talon* were hull-down behind the rubble of a building at the plaza's western edge, just the two of them to cover the plaza and hold the half kilometre to either side. There had been other tanks covering the area at first, but they had pulled north.

The worst part was that she did not care. She was fairly sure that the others on this section of the line had moved off without orders. They were fresh, newly dropped, and they wanted to see the battle, to get their hands dirty, to claim some kills. It almost made her laugh to think about it. She had to stay, and she only had half a functional squadron. She knew that she should have been annoyed by it, but she found that she really, really did not care. If it stayed quiet, then that was fine by–

The Land Speeder roared across the plaza. A pressure wave split the fog as it banked hard, the air beneath it shimmering with anti-grav disruption. Tahirah caught an impression of hard lines and deep blue armour before the skimmer cut back into the ruins and vanished. The echo of its passing faded slowly.

'What the hell was that?' shouted Vail. Tahirah thumbed the squadron vox.

'Full alert, fire at any target.'

'What the–' Vail began.

'A scout, a Land Speeder. Looks like it's our turn at last.'

Vail went silent.

'You sure it was an enemy, Tah?'

'No.' She paused. No, she really was not sure about much at the moment. The skimmer had been blue – she was certain of that, but what did that mean? 'Right now I am working on a rule that anything coming from in front of us means us harm.'

Vail turned his head towards her, and she could tell that he was about to say something.

A burst of noise ripped from her headset, filling her head with screeching static. She pressed her hands to her head, scrabbling at the suit hood. The static screamed higher and higher, and then dissolved into a clicking rush like the

burbling of a broken machine. She heard someone yell, and wondered if it had been her. The sound vanished, leaving a faint ringing in her ears.

‘Now what–’

‘I see something.’ It was Vantine from the right sponson.

Sharp eyes, that girl, thought Tahirah.

‘Confirm,’ she called.

‘I have them,’ called Vail, his face pressed against the gunsight. ‘Incoming.’

Tahirah was already looking into her own sight. Something moved on the opposite side of the plaza. She flicked to infra-vision, and there they were: low, hard-edged shapes, hulls hot and exhaust fumes trailing cooling plumes behind them. She recognised the angles, and the shape of the weapons jutting from their turrets.

Executioners and Vanquishers?

Why wasn’t Vail firing? The question flashed across her mind. She opened her mouth to order the shot.

Her eyes flicked to the auspex. The targets were there, but each one was pulsing between red and blue, between friendly and hostile. She remembered the first mission into the world above; the moment she had thought that they had hit one of their own machines. She bit her lip behind her breath mask.

‘How the hell did they end up in front of the line?’ said Vail. Tahirah did not reply, but cursed and thumbed the vox.

‘Hold fire,’ she shouted. ‘They could be friendlies. All units, only fire on my command.’

The machines kept coming through the ruins.

*They must be able to see u*s, she thought. *Just like we can see them, but they are not firing either.* She thumbed the vox to wide broadcast.

‘Unknown units, code phrase confirm – “Vengeance”,’ she said, and waited for the one word that would confirm that the machines coming at them were not enemies.

Raider.

A simple word that would mean that this was not the start of another battle. A fresh surge of vox-static and the rising beat of her heart filled the waiting silence.

Akil heard Tahirah’s challenge across the vox, and his gaze remained fixed on *Lantern*. He felt as if he could see each of the rivets and marks on the armour plates. Power trembled through its bulk – held back, poised. Its main gun was primed to fire, heat fuming from the barrel. The lascannon in the unmanned left sponson hung loose, like the arm of a dead man. Blood was hammering through his skull.

‘*Identify yourselves,*’ came Tahirah’s voice again. ‘*Code phrase confirm – “Vengeance”.*’

‘What’s going on?’ said Udo. Akil didn’t answer. ‘Why aren’t we firing? Let me hear the squadron vox.’

Akil licked his lips. The vehicles approaching from the other side of the plaza had still not answered. He felt the moment stretch. He could feel every seam of his enviro-suit against his skin; the air sucking from the breath mask; the shape of the knife in the pouch on his thigh.

The vox crackled again, then produced an unfamiliar voice.

‘*Unknown unit, this is Captain Sildar of Olarian 56th. Please reciprocate identification.*’

Akil let out a breath he did not know he had been holding. They were friendly, a unit lost out beyond the holding line. This was not the moment – he did not have to choose yet. The approaching machines would just pass by, or perhaps they would join them on the line. Everything would be all right. He did not have to choose. Perhaps he never would.

But the silence lengthened. He could almost see Tahirah staring at the blue icons on her auspex screen, weighing up possibilities. Choosing.

‘*Negative,*’ said Tahirah. ‘*Please confirm code phrase.*’

‘*Salvation,*’ the other voice replied.

‘Fire!’ shouted Tahirah, and closed her eyes as las-blasts bleached the sight view. The twin cracks of the lascannons firing echoed through the hull. Her teeth began to ache as the capacitors dragged power for the next shot, then her eye was back at the sight. The lead enemy vehicle had slewed to the side, ploughing into a half-collapsed wall. Heat dribbled from its wounded hull. Behind it the other machines were trying to move out of the firing line.

What if I was wrong? she thought, hearing the plasma destroyer begin to whine as it focused. *What if the code phrases had got mixed up...?* But there was no room for doubt. This was not a war of human fallibility.

It was a war of machines.

The Executioner fired, and *Lantern*’s compartment filled with furnace heat. The plasma hit the leading enemy on its barrel – the shell in its weapon breech exploded and tore the turret from the hull. Tahirah was already looking past the wreck at the other enemy machines. There were four at least. They would need to kill or cripple two more before they returned fire.

Why had they not returned fire? The thought rose and snagged in her mind even as she watched an Executioner that was the mirror of *Lantern* grind backwards on its tracks at the opposite side of the plaza. *If they are the enemy, why did they not have their guns loaded and ready?*

Lantern’s plasma destroyer was building power again, sucking plasma from the storage flasks with a high-pitched whine. The lascannons fired again, one bolt of

energy punching through a broken wall in a shower of super-heated dust. The second drew a molten line across the armour of a Vanquisher.

Two shots. Just two shots in a squadron with three working lascannons...

She thumbed the vox. 'Akil, get Udo to fire! Curse you. Fire!'

Akil pulled the knife out. For a second he looked at it, its curve shining like a waning moon. He had possessed it all his life. He had used it, of course – he had been taught how to use it – but it had never taken a life until now. The blood slid down the blade's edge, already seeming to clot. Around him the air sang with the muffled sounds of battle. He looked at Udo. The boy was slumped forward over his gun mount. The puncture in his suit was a red-edged smile under his ribs.

Salvation.

The word rang around him, blurring with memories: Jalen's face, his daughters staring back from the screen of a data-slate, the fire falling from Tallarn's sky.

'I am...' The words formed, and then caught on his lips. 'I am so sorry.'

He pulled Udo's body back from the gun mount. Blood sloshed inside the suit, and ran from the gash. He dropped the knife, not looking where it fell.

The lascannon felt unfamiliar to his touch. The light of the gunsight filled his eyepiece. He traversed the lascannon. *Lantern*'s rear armour filled the sight with red blooms of heat. The trigger was stiff against his finger.

'*Akil,*' came Tahirah's voice, angry and concerned. '*Akil, speak. If you can hear me, get that gun firing now.*'

But what if Jalen lied? The question came again, as it had with every breath for the last few hours. Akil closed his eyes. The world was hissing and roaring with weapons fire. *But what if he had not?*

Tahirah's voice was in his ear, telling him to fire, asking what was wrong.

His hands felt numb.

'*Akil–*'

The Sapphire City fell.

In the north the two sides ground against each other in a ragged border of dead iron and flames. Hundreds of defenders poured against the Iron Warriors' advance, paying the price in lives to hold them back. Machines choked gullies that had once been streets. Clouds of smoke reached up through the fog to touch the sky, like black banners over the ruins below.

To the south, where the ruins met the coast, the Shadowswords and Stormlord tridents held until the enemy came from the ocean. Great block-bodied assault vehicles, which had driven across the seabed for kilometres, broke the surface like huge shell-backed beasts returning to land. Fire pattered against their wet hulls as they ground up the shore, but it was not enough. Terminators emerged from the assault craft, wading through the half-sunken streets to kill the super-heavy tanks with lightning-wrapped hammers and fists.

In the centre, the defences cracked as multiple enemy formations appeared behind the loyalists' front line. The enemy rolled down the length of the cordon before they could even turn their machines. None amongst the fractured defence's command knew how it could have happened.

EPILOGUE

The Hydra’s Dream

+Did it work?+ asked the first voice. It was not a true voice, but in this place nothing was really true. As both the speaker and the listeners knew, the truth was what you made it.

+The result was adequate.+

+An unnecessary risk – to put the matter in the hands of untested assets.+

+True, but they are tested now.+

+How many followed the order?+

+Nine.+

+And the rest?+

+Fell in battle.+

+The remaining assets know nothing of each other?+

+Nothing. Just as before.+

+You still believe they have value?+

+Our masters do. What other factor should I consider?+

+What of the other matter?+

+It proceeds.+

+It is certain that Horus will send an emissary?+

+He already has.+

SIREN

61 days after
the death of Tallarn

‘For the dream of a voice I have crossed the night, and walked the road to the horizon.’

– Songs of The Lost (Canto XII)
by Alderra Sul-cado, Unification-era Terra

The Battle of Tallarn was a battle that might never have been. In the wake of the Iron Warriors bombardment, Tallarn was a hell made real. Viral agents had reduced all biological matter to slime. Death blew in the wind and rolled in the water. Nothing lived or could live on the surface. Some – the fortunate or the cursed – did survive. Sealed beneath the ground in shelters, the last humans on Tallarn breathed air that had never touched the land above, woke to yellow machine light, and heard silence crowd around them like the promise of oblivion.

On the surface, the Iron Warriors descended into the hell they had made. War machines crisscrossed the desolation, sensors reaching into the wind and finding no answer. Beneath the earth, the survivors readied to venture out of their shelters. Skinned in envirosuits and sealed inside tanks, they went to the surface and discovered the destroyers of their world had remained. A war of revenge began. Squadrons of tanks raided the surface, killed Iron Warriors and sank back beneath the ground. Fresh corpses dissolved into the blighted soil, and the husks of vehicles became home to the wind. Yet still this was not a true battle.

Perturabo had sent only a fraction of his Legion’s strength to the surface. The defiant raiders took their toll but the Iron Warriors always had more to take the place of the dead. Without aid the survivors would dwindle, and their struggle would pass into the unknown void between history and memory. To make it the battle whose name would echo down the millennia would take more. It would take armies greater than those that had survived the first attack. It would take those loyal to the Emperor knowing that there was a war here to fight. It would take an event around which history could pivot.

‘Can anyone hear me?’ Gatt released the transmit key and waited. Static washed out of the speaker grille. Kulok watched as the young man closed his eyes for a second and took a tired breath. ‘Please acknowledge if you can hear.’

The static returned. Gatt looked up at Kulok. Red veins crazed the whites of the boy’s eyes. It seemed as if he were about to say something, but he turned and rested his forehead on the knuckles of his hands.

Pieces of machinery covered the pressed metal table in front of Gatt. Brass-cased devices clicked with the sound of turning cogs. Tangles of wires linked the equipment to a generator unit on the floor. Kulok could smell the metallic tang of electrics shorting out, and the purr of the generator unit set his teeth on edge. The

promethium lamp hanging from the low roof spluttered and the light dimmed. Kulok glanced at it, holding the small tongue of light in his gaze for a second until it settled. The lighting system in the shelter had died two days ago. The orange glow of promethium lamps was the only light they had now. Thankfully, the air reprocessors were still working.

Kulok took a breath and rubbed his eyes. The air stank even after weeks of breathing it. What he would give for a cup of water that did not taste of chemicals. A brief memory of the snow water sellers filled his mind: their bandoliers of glasses glinting in the sunlight, the frosted canisters balanced on their shoulders as they walked the Crescent City's streets.

He looked up at the sound of the hatch opening. Sabir stepped into the room, glanced at Kulok, and closed the hatch behind him. He looked more like a vagrant than a prefectus in Tallarn's administration. An expanding patina of stains covered the older man's robes. Folds of skin sagged from his chin. His grey eyes held sticky moisture at the corners and grease sheened his grey hair. To be fair, no one else in the small shelter looked any better. Kulok was sure, though, that the sour twist to Sabir's lips had been there long before they had ended up buried down here.

'How's the seer?' asked Kulok.

'Dreaming.' Sabir shrugged. 'Dying.'

Kulok nodded. He had expected no different. The astropath had been delirious since the bombardment. Sabir had said that the seer rarely used his gifts any more, and had kept to his chambers in the city's censorium. It had only been the screaming that had reminded the scribes that the astropath was there when the bombardment had started. Now the old seer just slept soundlessly in a coma. He would not last much longer, Kulok was certain of that. Already wisp thin and creased with age, the astropath's pulse was weakening with every passing day. It was just another reason to find out whether they were the only people still alive on Tallarn.

Kulok glanced back at Gatt. The boy was staring at the vox dials, mouth still, finger unmoving on the transmission key.

'Keep trying,' said Kulok.

Gatt did not respond.

'Do another sweep through the major channels then start back on the minor ones.' He turned to the doorway and placed his hand on the locking wheel.

'No one can hear us,' said Gatt.

Kulok could hear the exhaustion in the words, and the tremble of anger hidden just beneath its surface.

'We have to keep trying,' said Kulok, as he pulled the hatch open.

'Give the kid a break,' said Sabir.

‘We have to–’ began Kulok, but Sabir cut him off.

‘We?’ Sabir’s lip twisted back from his yellow teeth. ‘When did you start to talk for everyone?’ He shook his head. ‘You’re not even supposed to be here, and now you are saying what we must do?’

Kulok took a step towards the prefectus. Sabir flinched back, eyes widening. Kulok stopped.

You’re not supposed to be here.

It was true, of course. Kulok was in the shelter by luck rather than design. The shelter was one of the smaller ones, buried under one of the Sapphire City’s grand censoriums. He had been waiting in the second vestibule on the ground floor when the bombs fell. According to the city records, he owed tax and fines dating back over a decade. He had been avoiding the summons for the last year, but at last a magistrate had tired of Kulok’s protests. Bondsmen had come for him and made it clear that it did not matter that Kulok had seen service in the Crusade; he was coming with them whether he liked it or not. He owed those bondsmen his life.

When the roof in the censorium had begun to shake, he had known what it was. He had been on the surface of Desh when the fleet had opened up on the fortress cities, and the memory of that moment pulled him from his seat as the sirens began to sound. He had not known that the bombardment was viral, but a fleet could reduce an unshielded city to rubble with less exotic weapons. He had found the entrance to the shelter, and was just through the door as the biohazard alarms added to the din. The hatch had locked behind him, and he had found himself starring into the eyes of the few others who had found safety. Most were scribes and officials, junior for the most part and all terrified. A few, like Sabir, had the trappings of authority, but not a trace of the will to use it. None of them had known what to do. All of them wanted someone to tell them what to do almost as much as they wanted it all to not be happening. Kulok had filled that need, though that did not stop some, like Sabir, resenting his assumed command.

Kulok sighed and turned away from the prefectus.

‘I am just trying to get through this,’ said Kulok. ‘The astropath will die without help, and we won’t be far behind. We are a handful of people buried under a city. No one will come looking for us. Two weeks and we will be living in the dark listening to the last air hiss from the vents. That is, if the water systems keep working.’ He turned back to Sabir. ‘Do you like that idea? Does that calm your concerns about authority, Prefectus Sabir?’

Sabir just stared back.

Kulok shook his head. ‘Keep trying, please,’ he said to Gatt, and stepped towards the hatch.

‘It won’t work,’ said Gatt.

Kulok turned back to look at the young man.

‘I said it before I started. This set is for surface use,’ said Gatt. ‘It just does not have the power to punch through the ground above.’

Kulok said nothing for a moment. ‘And if it was on the surface?’

‘I don’t know.’ Gatt exhaled and ran his hands through his hair. ‘Maybe. But it would depend how close the receiver was. If there was someone else close by or with a big receiver they might hear… But there might be no one to hear.’

Kulok heard Sabir start to say something.

‘What about reaching the Sapphire City, or Zeffar?’ asked Kulok. ‘There were big shelters under those, military grade.’

Gatt shook his head. ‘It’s six hundred kilometres to the Sapphire City, a thousand to Zeffar. The signal won’t make that.’

Kulok nodded slowly, an idea hardening in his mind. ‘Get the vox into the armoured carrier vehicle.’

Gatt frowned, then his eyes went wide.

‘You can’t go out,’ said Sabir.

Kulok turned to look at the older man. There was fear in the prefectus’ watery eyes. They had all seen the atmospheric warning lights shining red above the outer hatches.

‘We must do this,’ said Kulok.

‘You will kill us!’

‘The vehicle ramp is airlocked,’ said Kulok calmly. ‘We have transport. No guns, but it’s enviro-sealed. There is a decontamination gate in the airlock. We probably have enough power to make all of those work.’

‘You can’t.’ A tremble of pleading edged Sabir’s voice, and the skin under his stubble was pale.

‘Two weeks, Sabir,’ said Kulok. ‘After that, we might as well open the doors and let whatever’s outside in. You can stay here with the rest. Look after the seer.’

A red flush spread across Sabir’s cheeks as fear shifted back to anger. ‘Who says you are–’

‘I say, Sabir,’ said Kulok and watched the words sink in. ‘I say.’

Lycus slept, and remembered.

‘There is nothing to discuss,’ he had said, and held his gaze steady. Above him the man on the throne of lapis shifted, and did not meet Lycus’ eye.

The room had felt crowded even though it was large enough to hold several hundred. Golden fabric hung from the copper-lined ceiling, cutting the space into channels that led the eye to the windows which opened onto the views of the Crescent City beyond. Blue and green tiles covered the floor. The old man who sat on a green alabaster throne at the chamber’s centre was still, rigid with formality.

Dellasarius, victor of the Tempest Conflagration, now governor militant of Tallarn, wore red armour shaped like the toned muscles of ancient heroes. Silver thunderbolts cut across the lacquered metal. Struts and pistons ran down his limbs, and every now and then a bellows hiss of air escaped from a vent in the side of his torso. Set behind a wide gorget, the governor's face was blade thin. The only other flesh that was visible was Dellasarius' right hand where his rings of office glittered from spider thin fingers. But it was his eyes that said more than anything else: grey and watery, they fixed on nothing, as if only wanting to see the world in glances. Dellasarius was a hero, Lycus knew that, but the governor looked as though mundanity had leeched away his past strength.

A clutch of advisors – Lycus presumed that is what they were – stood around the throne. They all looked wealthy, soaked in fine fabrics, jewellery glinting on their fingers and necks. A few exchanged glances. Those that had looked at Lycus had done so for only an instant. He stood five paces from the base of the throne, his helmet under his right arm, his left hand resting on the pommel of the blade sheathed at his waist. Jagged ridges and gouges of battle damage ran under the yellow paint of Lycus' armour. Glossy pleats of flesh twisted across his cheeks and his mouth was a twisted gash over broken teeth. Lycus could smell the mingled fear in the humans' sweat. He did not like this, he never liked this. But it was a necessity. He had a rising concern that he was going to have to be everything they feared him to be.

One of the crowd of advisors took a step forward, dared a glance at Lycus' face, and then dropped his eyes. The man had a pinched pale face the colour of milk. His lips twisted before he spoke.

'With all humbleness, my lord–'

'I am not a lord.' Lycus' voice cut the man's words like a sword blow. Silence filled the heartbeat after he spoke. Lycus nodded to the governor militant. 'He *is a lord.'*

The fabric of the advisor's robes was trembling. Lycus noticed that the cloth was embroidered leaf patterns in iridescent turquoise on black. He presumed that the man was deciding how afraid he was of a Space Marine. The advisor licked his lips and opened his mouth.

Not scared enough, *thought Lycus.*

'With all humbleness,' said the advisor again. The words were so honeyed they almost dripped from the man's tongue. 'There are a number of things that must be resolved before your request can be considered.'

Lycus remained silent. The advisor who had spoken licked his lips again.

'My lord Dellasarius,' said Lycus, turning his gaze slowly back to the governor militant. 'Who are these people?'

The governor militant looked around at the crowd of advisors, and then back to Lycus.

‘Representatives of the caliphers and trade dynasties of Tallarn,’ said Dellasarius. Lycus saw a flash of emotion ripple across the wrinkled skin. ‘They are concerned with the practical complexities of what you are saying.’

‘Loyalty is not complex,’ said Lycus.

The governor’s eyes met Lycus’s gaze. He gave a small nod.

‘But its workings are,’ said a heap of a man smothered in saffron silk.

Lycus looked at the man, and was surprised to see that there was no fear in the amber flecked eyes. The saffron-clad advisor gestured with a fat hand heavy with silver and gold.

‘What will it mean for this world? You say that we must mobilise and look to our defences. That we must expend resources fortifying our planet and our system.’

The advisor opened both his hands as he made the final point, as if expressing honest sorrow. The other advisor, with the sour-milk face, filled the pause before Lycus could reply.

‘And you say that we must stand ready to send forces wherever you think they are needed.’

Lycus nodded, allowing his left hand to shift to the pommel of his sword. ‘That is what you must do.’

‘We do not have those resources,’ said the pale-faced man with a grimace. Behind him there was a ripple of fabric and a trembling of jewels as the advisors nodded and muttered agreement.

‘Our coffers have run dry for years,’ said the fat man with a shrug. ‘Things are not what they were.’

‘Immaterial,’ said Lycus. His face had hardened. ‘Are you wilfully blind to what the galaxy has become? This was a primary-grade staging planet – a crusade hub. There are troops here, and weapons, and materiel.’

The governor gave a small nod, but the fat man gave a brief laugh that sent his cheeks and chins shaking.

Lycus felt a caustic tingle in his muscles, and took a careful breath to keep his anger chained.

‘Scraps. Mismatched units stranded here, equipment that has no operators, weapons that have no bullets, bullets that have no weapons.’

‘Sadurni…’ began Dellasarius. A little colour flushed into the governor’s withered face.

Lycus turned, his entire presence now focused on the advisors. The crowd seemed to shrink, a low trembling running through the throng.

‘Are you saying that you cannot or that you will not serve your Emperor?’ Lycus’ voice was low, hard edged. As he spoke he readied himself, preparing his muscles to draw and fire his bolt pistol.

Am I too late? *The question rolled through him as the conditioned kill reflexes slotted into place*. Is there something other than greed here? Have the agents of the traitors already been here? Are these people more than blind? Will this be like Cantaridine again?

‘No!’ roared Dellasarius. The governor was on his feet. ‘This world is loyal to Terra, and we shall–’

The alarm screamed. The advisors froze. The noise intensified as siren after siren rose in chorus.

The governor was standing where he had risen from his throne, his mouth opening. Lycus was two strides across the room before the second siren started. The advisors had not moved. They were standing, hands pressed against their ears.

In Lycus’ mind, facts and instinct formed conclusions as his muscles pushed him forwards. The alarm was for an orbital bombardment. Munitions fired from orbit took time to cross a planet’s shell of air. But not much time. They would have minutes, if they were lucky.

He seized the governor. The man’s puzzled expression twisted to shock as Lycus lifted him from the ground and turned towards the room’s doors. The advisors were moving now, running like silk-draped cattle. Lycus surged through them without breaking stride. The room’s doors were copper-plated plasteel, carved with base reliefs of vines curling through trees. Lycus felt the impact jolt through his body as his shoulder crumpled the doors and ripped them from their frames.

‘What is happening?’ gasped Dellasarius. Lycus was dragging him with him as he ran.

‘The enemy is here, lord,’ he said. Out beyond the high windows of the palace, the sky brightened with the light of fresh, false suns.

‘Marshal Lycus?’ the voice said nearby.

He blinked, and the half of his mind that had fallen through the waking dream of the past meshed with the half that had remained awake. The room around him was small and bare. A lumen-globe shone with a dirty light above the only door. In the weeks since the bombardment, this had been his sanctuary in the few moments he took for rest. He was alone here, a last warrior of the VII Legion on Tallarn. No word had come from the *Light of Inwit* after the attack. That the strike cruiser might have survived was a possibility. That it might have reached the system edge, and even now be bringing word of the death of Tallarn to forces loyal to the Emperor, was also a possibility. Both seemed unlikely to Lycus. His

brothers were dead, his ship lost, and he was alone amongst the remains of humanity on a dead world.

‘Marshal?’ came the voice again, and the chamber door hinged inwards. The human who stepped through was shivering despite the warm air. The man’s face was pale under a shaved scalp, his uniform ill-fitting and stained with dry sweat.

‘Yes,’ said Lycus.

The aide stopped where he was and began twitching his weight from foot to foot. The man was coming down off a stim high. Lycus had noticed that a lot of the officers in the Rachab fortress had taken to using narcotics to counter the effects of fatigue.

‘The governor militant requests your presence,’ said the aide, carefully.

Lycus watched the aide try to remain still, and then stood. His armour hummed to full life as he moved. His bolter came up with him and clamped to his thigh with a snap of magnetic force. He moved towards the door. The aide followed.

‘Where is the governor militant?’ asked Lycus as he ducked through the door.

‘In the main communication hub,’ said the aide, running to keep up. Lycus looked around at the man as he strode on.

‘The signal arrays have heard something,’ said the man. ‘Something new.’

‘Again,’ said Kulok, raising his voice over the growl of the vehicle’s power plant.

Gatt shook his head and gestured at a gauge beside the drive column.

‘The power reserves are almost empty. We are draining the fuel.’

The suit muffled Gatt’s words. Even through the internal vox, he had to raise his voice to be heard over the rumble of the carrier’s engine. The machine was a big beast with high sides and a blunt nose painted in white and blue. The rest of its slab metal hide had been a pale grey, stamped with the emblems of the Crescent City’s administration. It had been intended as an emergency transport for officials in the case of a mass riot. Its colours had reflected that purpose: a bold statement of authority in the face of anarchy. The heraldry had not lasted long after they reached the surface. After a few minutes of rolling through the fog drowned streets, Kulok had noticed grey sludge running down the glass of the vision slits. The air was dissolving the paint as it passed over them. He had not mentioned it to Gatt; the boy was rattled enough already.

Kulok looked at the fuel gauge. They had drained the power reserves, and now were running everything off the engines. Most of the main tank was gone, and they would have to use the reserve to get them back to the shelter.

‘There is enough,’ he said. ‘Keep transmitting.’

‘What if we get lost?’ asked Gatt. ‘What if it takes us more fuel to get back than it took to get here?’

Kulok looked at him for a long moment. He had stopped the carrier on top of a hill. Where exactly in the city they were, he was not sure – possibly in the foot

hills close to the Dawn Tower. They had moved through streets heaped with slime, sliding and skidding every few meters. The buildings had loomed through the fog, glass clinging to the empty eyes of windows. He had thought he had recognised a water fountain, its tiered pools brimming with black water. Twenty years he had walked the streets of the Crescent City, from the sprawl on the slopes of the mountains to the river forks. He knew its smells, and the feel of its stones beneath tyre and foot. But the Crescent City no longer existed. The buildings and streets no longer formed a city; they had become something else, a tangle of monoliths set to watch over the dead. The route back to the shelter only existed as set of memorised landmarks and distances in Kulok's mind. If they ran low on fuel, or if he forgot the route, then they would die on the surface.

'Send one more transmission,' he said. 'Then we move out.'

Gatt looked at him, suddenly uncertain as Kulok sat back in the drive cradle.

'One more?' asked Gatt. 'If no one has heard us yet–'

'Just send it,' said Kulok. If the boy was looking to protest again, Kulok did not see. He had closed his eyes, feeling the big frame of the carrier shake around him as the engines turned over.

'This is the Crescent City censorium shelter. Please respond. We require assistance and evacuation. Survivors include senior administrators,' Gatt paused. Static buzzed over the open vox. 'Look, we have an old man dying, and the rest of us aren't far behind. He is an astropath, not that that will make any difference, because you can't hear this. There is no point to the message. You aren't there! No one is there!' He stopped. His finger still held on the transmission key for a second, then he released it. The static died. He turned to look at Kulok and shrugged as though to pre-empt whatever rebuke was coming.

Kulok met the boy's eyes. They were hard with defiance behind the fogged eyepieces.

'Alright,' said Kulok softly. 'Alright…' He reached out and punched a control. The engine noise cycled down to silence. 'We wait an hour,' said Kulok, 'then move.'

'Why wai–'

'I need to sleep,' said Kulok, voice hard. Then he shook his head and turned away to pull himself out of the driver's cradle. 'I need to sleep.'

He lay down in the crew compartment. The light coming from the armoured view slits was grainy yellow. He rested his head against his hands and closed his eyes. Sleep drifted up into his thoughts, filling his head with memories of clear skies and swift water.

'Can you hear that?' asked Gatt.

Kulok sat up, his half formed dreams fading slowly. He glanced at the vox transmitter, but it sat silent. Gatt was sitting up, head tilted to the side. Kulok

blinked, opened his mouth… and heard it.

A thin, high wail slid into his ears. On and on it rolled ululating up and down, each note sliding to the next in drawn-out rhythm. For a second he thought it was coming from inside the carrier, but it was coming from every direction, seeping in through the hull and his suit. After a long moment he gave a cold bark of laughter. Gatt twitched his head towards him.

‘It’s the city’s attack alarms,’ said Kulok. ‘The power to them must still be running. They are still sounding the warning.’

Gatt shivered, but said nothing. Kulok settled onto the floor of the crew compartment and closed his eyes again. Around him, the sound of sirens stretched out into the dark behind his eyes, and dreams of the dead city came to claim him.

The adepts and officers turned to look at Lycus as he entered the command chamber. He ignored them, crossing the space with fluid strides. A pillar of machinery thrust from the centre of the floor, hung with cabling and tended by two enginseers. The room smelt of human sweat and ozone.

This was the true heart of the Rachab fortress, and the centre for the war of vengeance against the Iron Warriors. Buried under the mountains to the north of the Crescent City, the Rachab was vast. Its vaults extended down to the root of the mountain range and spread through the rock in a warren of caverns and tunnels. It had been used as the seat of the Great Crusade in this volume of space, but dust and silence had gathered in its halls before the Iron Warriors had come. Now atrocity had given it new purpose.

A few of the officers exchanged glances, a few others just stared at him. Dellasarius stood beside the stack of machinery at the centre of the chamber, his aides and senior officers clustered armour him. He turned to look at Lycus and gave a small nod. Some of the officers around the governor militant hesitated in the middle of saluting. Dellasarius’ greeting – both curt and familiar – confused them. Most of them were unseasoned, and strung out by the demands of the last few weeks. These were the commanders of soldiers left behind by war and history, flotsam generals now called to lead in a war that seemed already lost. Most were already confused by the presence of a transhuman in their midst. Lycus’ nebulous level of authority within the leadership of the loyalists was not helping.

Lycus pointed at where a green transmission light pulsed on the bronze communication dais. ‘When did the transmission come in?’ he asked.

‘We picked it up forty minutes ago,’ said a red-robed adept in a dead machine voice. ‘It could have been transmitting longer. The transmission is poor quality. The probability is that they are using limited range equipment beyond its ordained rating. Transmission ceased ten minutes ago. We have a vox capture of the full duration of the transmission.’

‘Put it on speaker,’ said Lycus. An officer in the crimson uniform of the Tallarn Governance Command glanced at Dellasarius from her place beside the communications dais.

‘Put it on,’ said the governor militant. The voice filled the chamber a second later.

‘This is the Crescent… censorium… respond… Assistance…’ Static wailed and chopped through the voice. Lycus could hear the tiredness in the words – a young male human, twenty years perhaps, wrung out and talking by rote rather than from hope.

‘He just repeats the same message,’ said the officer. She was called Sussabarka, Lycus recalled.

‘You have composited a meaning?’ asked Lycus.

‘They claim to be transmitting on behalf of the Crescent City censorium shelter,’ said Sussabarka. ‘They are asking for assistance and evacuation of a dozen administrative personnel, *senior* personnel to be precise.’

‘What was the size of the censorium shelter?’ asked Lycus.

‘Small,’ said another officer, eyes darting to Lycus and away. ‘It was a bolt hole built in case of civil unrest. It could house fifty at the most, but it’s not equipped for prolonged use under these… conditions.’

‘Does it have any strategic reserves or capabilities?’

Sussabarka shook her head. ‘None.’

‘It is a burrow built to make the great and the good feel safe,’ said a cold voice.

Every one of the officers turned to look at Dellasarius. The governor turned to Lycus, one grey eyebrow arched above his eyes. ‘It was pointless and is worthless.’

‘Then why summon me?’ asked Lycus.

The recorded voice of the transmission cracked and spat through the silence.

‘…City censorium… please…’

‘Because of the last thing included in the transmission before it went off air,’ said Dellasarius.

‘Survivors include…’

Lycus held Dellasarius’ gaze, and for the first time noticed the glimmer of fire in the pale eyes.

‘…include…’

The governor gave a small nod, and the ghost of a smile brushed across his wasted face.

‘…an astropath…’ said the voice from the static.

Kulok started the carrier’s engine, and the sound of the sirens vanished. Vibration kicked through the machine’s body. He had slept for… He did not know how long he had slept for, and in most ways that mattered, it did not matter at all. Night was

beginning to creep across the city. Beyond the view slits, the fog shimmered through decaying colours. That was not good. He ran through the landmarks that would lead them back to the shelter. He hoped that he could still find them in the failing light. Gatt sat beside him, hunched and silent. Lycus paused, the engine rumbling through his bones.

‘Gatt,’ he said. The boy did not move. ‘Try the vox again.’

‘Why?’ asked Gatt.

Because we are going back to die in a stinking hole in the ground, thought Kulok. *Because someone else must be out there.* They must. He spoke none of his thoughts.

‘One last check,’ he said.

Gatt was still for a long moment then gave a gesture that was half a nod and half a shrug, and pulled himself back over to the vox transmitter.

‘Alright,’ said Gatt.

‘Did you respond?’ asked Lycus.

The officer called Sussabarka shook her head.

‘Not at first,’ she said. ‘The signal was poor quality and in clear. There seemed no point in responding to–’

‘People who were going to be dead soon,’ said Lycus, his voice emotionless.

‘Indeed,’ said Sussabarka.

‘But after that final transmission?’

‘We attempted to establish signal conjunction,’ answered one of the tech priests. ‘But could not locate the transmission. The highest probability is that they ceased transmission.’

‘And that could mean… several things,’ said Dellasarius carefully.

The lights blinked on the communication dais. The recorded voice had unwound into a dull hiss of static. No one said anything. No one needed to say anything. An astropath could mean that a message could be sent to other loyalist forces. Tallarn’s plight, and the presence of the full might of the Iron Warriors, could be a secret no more. It was a slim hope, a strand hanging by a single word spoken by a voice that might now belong to a dead man.

‘This is the Crescent City censorium shelter,’ said Gatt, then paused, breathed slowly and continued. ‘Can anyone hear this?’

A gust of crackle came over the vox as Gatt released the transmission key.

Kulok waited.

Nothing. Just the hiss of machine silence. After a long moment, he nodded to Gatt.

‘We are moving,’ he said, and engaged the engine. Gears meshed, and the machine lurched. A dark numbness was spreading through him, pulling his thoughts down into a toneless void.

The vox crackled, and Gatt reached for the power switch.

'…Crescent… shelter…'

The voice reached through the static. Gatt's hand froze. Kulok twisted in the drive cradle.

'…hear… respond…'

Gatt did not move, transfixed by the sound coming from the speakers.

'…confirm…'

'This is the Crescent City shelter,' said Gatt at last, and there were tears in the boy's words.

'We hear you, Crescent shelter,' said the comms officer. 'Your location is confirmed. Prepare for relief force. Short-range communication will be on frequencies daleth-sigma-two-one, redundancy chi-four-seven. Use encryption key listed on magenta code key for all future comms. Confirm and list back, Crescent shelter.'

Lycus listened as the shaking human voice listed back the details. Static bubbled up every few words, and it took several passes to be certain that both sides of the transmission had understood.

'Wait for us, Crescent shelter,' said the comms officer at last. 'We are coming. Out.'

Lycus waited for the signal noise to fade, and then turned to Dellasarius. 'You had already decided on a course of action?'

The governor militant nodded. The rest of the human officers were watching silently, some busying themselves with minor tasks, others standing with stiff formality as the military ruler of Tallarn and the Marshal of the VII Legion spoke.

'If they do have an astropath, this one action could change the course of this battle.'

Lycus gave a single nod. 'I will lead the ground operation.'

'Thank you, Marshal Lycus,' said Dellasarius. 'If you succeed, Tallarn will owe you a great debt twice over.'

Lycus shook his head. 'Service, loyalty, honour, these are both the debt and the payment.'

Dellasarius bowed his head briefly.

Lycus turned, his thoughts shifting between calculations and threat assessments.

The Crescent City censorium was fifty kilometres from the Rachab's southern foothill entrance. In clear conditions, with Legion war machines, that distance could be crossed in under an hour. But he did not have the strength of his battle-brothers with him.

'Four vehicles, your fastest based on balance of ordnance, armour weight and reliability. Two main battle tanks, an assault carrier, and a machine with sky cover

capability. A squad in environmental armour, void hardened if available. Your best crews and soldiers, experience and fortitude weighted over rank. All ready to move out within ten minutes.'

Dellasarius flicked his eyes at the officer called Sussabarka.

'Make it so, brigadier.'

She saluted, but paused, frowning.

'Is there a problem?' asked Dellasarius.

'You have no capacity for evacuation of those in the shelter.'

Lycus looked at her and nodded. 'That is because we are not going to evacuate them,' he said.

Sussabarka looked at him, and he saw realisation harden in her eyes.

'The signal we heard, and those that we exchanged with the Crescent shelter, they were in clear…' she said.

'We are not alone,' said Dellasarius, 'and if we heard them, there is a chance, a very good chance, that our enemies did too.'

'And if they did, they will be coming,' said Lycus. 'They will be coming to silence this one chance we have to send word to those loyal to the Emperor. Speed and strength, those are the only things that matter now. Our objective, and our only objective, is to reach this astropath. No matter the cost.'

'They are coming,' said Gatt, as soon as the inner door on the decontamination lock opened. Sabir and a cluster of the other survivors were waiting for them. Gatt bounded towards them grinning, eyes dancing with exhaustion and adrenaline. 'They are coming for us, a full relief force.' Sabir frowned and looked past Gatt at Kulok.

'It's true,' said Kulok as he sealed the hatch. He felt strangely empty. He had not expected to feel like this, but then had he expected to really make contact with anyone? Was it just a drive to survive, so deeply rooted in the meat of his species, that had pushed him on out beyond the edge of hope? Now, with the promise of rescue a reality, he did not know how to feel, and every thought rang hollow in his head.

Gatt was babbling to Sabir and the others, voice loud and echoing off the rockcrete walls. Kulok moved past him and pulled Sabir to the side.

'How is the seer?' he asked.

Sabir blinked. 'The same as before, no change.'

Kulok nodded to himself. There was something itching at the back of his thoughts. Something about the vox exchange on the surface that did not fit or feel right.

'Why do you ask?' asked Sabir, as Kulok moved away.

'They asked,' he replied. 'They asked twice what his condition was.'

He turned away before Sabir could reply. His feet carried him through the tunnels to the chamber where they had settled the astropath. The room had been intended as some kind of secure document storage. Metal-framed scroll racks lined the rockcrete walls, and a curation desk was bolted to one wall. The air was warm from the heat that bled through the wall from the main machine chamber. That was why they had chosen it. The astropath had been shivering since he had collapsed just after they got him to the shelter. Skin near blue, teeth chattering, it was as though he was outside in an ice wind rather than several metres below ground. They had wrapped him in blankets and put him in the warmest space they could find, but it had made no difference.

Kulok closed the door and looked down at the old man. The astropath might not be old, of course. Perhaps he was no older than Kulok; he might even have been younger. There was just no way that you could think of him as anything but old, not when you looked at him – snow-white, liver-spotted skin hung in wrinkles from a narrow, hairless skull. Yellow teeth glinted from behind cracked lips. Empty sockets gathered shadows beneath a high brow. Skeletal hands locked in crooked fists beneath his chin. He had a name, according to Sabir; he was called Halakime. Kulok stared at the figure for several minutes before he was certain that the man was still breathing. Satisfied, he turned to pull the door open.

'…an eye… of… night…'

Kulok whirled at the sound of the voice. The astropath had not moved. Kulok stood, unmoving, the sound of his rising heartbeat the only sound he could hear. Had he imagined the words? Was it the voice of his own exhaustion that had spoken? He took a step forward.

'…they see…'

This time Kulok saw the old man's lips move. He bent down. Hairs rose across his skin, and he felt something brush across his face as though he had touched a cobweb.

'…endless dark…' whispered the astropath. 'It's cold… The stars are cold…'

'Can you hear me?' he said, unsure of what else to say. 'I am here. I am with you.'

The old man grabbed Kulok so fast that he did not have time to move before a skeletal hand was locked around his wrist. Freezing pain poured up Kulok's arm. He could not move. Blackness surrounded him and he could see stars, but they were moving, swirling like insects, and beyond them something dark and sinuous coiled, clicking and purring as it glided closer and closer.

He wrenched free, gasping, and the chamber was there again. The astropath's mouth was still moving, the empty eye sockets seeming to stare up at Kulok.

'Dust…' hissed the astropath. 'Can't you hear the dust blowing on the wind? So dry. So cold under the dome of night.' The old man grimaced, and a sound that

was half a cry and half a whimper came from his mouth. It was a sound of pain and despair so sharp and pure that it cut through Kulok's fear and shock.

He took old man's hand in his. The fingers felt like ice, but this time there was no pain, and the room stayed fixed before his eyes.

'I am here,' he said, his voice low and firm. 'I am with you.' The astropath's head twitched, and Kulok felt the withered fingers return his grasp. 'I am here,' he said again. 'We are not alone. Help is coming.'

Lycus rode in the assault carrier, feeling the tracks rumble over the ground, watching the dead land pass through a visual feed link to his helm. The tombstone silhouettes of buildings rose from the yellow murk and sank back out of sight to either side of the highway. They were moving down the main arterial route that crossed the northern districts of the Crescent City on an elevated spit of rockcrete and plasteel. Vehicles dotted the slim slicked surface of the highway, but they were few; there had been no time for panic when the virus bombs fell, no time for people to jam the roads as they fled. There were a few places where vehicles blocked their path, but the four tanks simply rode over them without stopping.

A lascannon-mounted Annihilator rode in the head of the squadron. Behind it came the carrier holding Lycus and a section of troops. Third in line was the flak tank, its sensor dishes rotating and its cannon and missile mount twitching like the head of a hunting dog. Last was a Vanquisher, its long barrel swept behind it as it pushed through the fog. All of them were making best speed, engines roaring at the edge of tolerance as they plunged towards the heart of the city. They were exposed, but Lycus was hoping that the enemy did not know which direction they were coming from, and so would try and reach the censorium shelter before them rather than attempt to intercept. So far, that hope had been rewarded.

Lycus blinked away the pict image from one eyepiece. Eighteen humans filled the compartment around him. Each of them wore bulky sealed armour coated in vulcanised rubber. Domed helmets enclosed their heads and locked into brass collar rings. Most of them carried short-barrelled volkite culverins, but two rested meltaguns on their knees. They were all breathing air from tanks on their backs, and their armour was designed to let them fight in the vacuum of space. On the surface of Tallarn, it might buy them a few minutes of life. Lycus wondered how long his own power armour would last against the corrosive air. Any breaches and the virus would get in. Even he could not survive that.

'Marshal,' said the voice of the lead tank commander, her voice clipped and efficient over the vox. *'We are about to exit the highway.'*

'Confirmed, machine one,' he replied and then blinked his vox over to squadron broadcast. Luminous digits counted down at the edge of his sight. 'All units, objective is ten minutes at current speed, stand by for course change–'

The missile struck the lead tank and ripped it in two. Fire and smoke punched upwards from the detonation. The wreckage tumbled on down the highway, shedding tracks.

The carrier slewed to the side.

The vox exploded with voices.

'Evasive action…'

'… jamming our auspex…'

'Where did that…?'

'Trying to get a lock…'

'I read three aerial targets, descending fast…'

Lycus blinked back to the image from outside of the carrier. Orange flame and black smoke coiled through the fog. The wreckage of the lead tank was closing to their front. Explosions flashed in its carcass as munitions detonated in the blaze. Beyond it, he could see the ramp sliding off the highway down into the fog.

'Ram through it!' shouted Lycus. The troop carrier's driver did not hesitate. Power shuddered through the frame as the engines roared. The front of the machine hit the burning wreckage with a shriek of metal. The carrier bucked, momentum and power shoving it forwards as the bones of the burning tank raked down its side.

'Incoming!'

The shout from the flak tank reached Lycus' ears the instant before a second missile struck the wreckage behind them. A fresh explosion lifted the back of the carrier off the ground.

Lycus felt an instant of weightlessness, and then the machine struck the road. Force hammered through him. He heard muffled cries as the human soldiers slammed into the compartment walls.

'All units, full speed,' he called in the vox, 'keep moving. Machine three, target status.'

'I have three air units active,' came the voice of the flak tank commander. *'Two, possible Thunderhawk transports, dropping to surface in area of objective. Probable materiel deployment. Third is smaller, class uncertain, likely gunship. They are wrapped in sensor baffles.'*

Lycus felt himself bare his teeth. 'Burn the enemy from the sky,' he said.

'I have a partial lock. Engaging with cannons.' The fog flashed, and the rolling drum beat of the flak tank's heavy guns rose to meet the growl of the engines. *'They are evading. Transports have touched down on the surface. I have missile lock on the gunship.'* There was a pause that reminded Lycus of a marksman's inhalation before a shot. Then a streak of fire leapt into the fog shrouded sky. *'Missile loose.'*

‘Time to objective, six minutes,’ called Lycus. The transport lurched beneath him as it gathered speed down the ramp. Fire flashed high above them, strobing then sinking through the murk in burning yellow streaks.

‘Kill shot,’ said the voice from the flak tank.

‘Take the transports as they lift,’ said Lycus. ‘All units, auspex to maximum, enemy units active on objective.’

‘What was that?’ asked Sabir looking up towards the ceiling of the shelter.

No one answered. Gatt’s hands froze in the midst of checking the vox’s encryption settings. Another rumble trembled through the walls. Dust fell. Kulok felt an electric shiver circle his stomach. It was an old but familiar feeling. He had felt it when the bombardment had started, and before then in the years he had lost to the Great Crusade.

‘Start broadcasting,’ he said to Gatt without moving his eyes from the ceiling. ‘Make a connection, and find out how close the rescue force is.’

Gatt nodded, but Kulok was already moving to the door. His skin was buzzing, his mouth dry, the taste of metal on his tongue and teeth.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Sabir.

‘To the airlock,’ said Kulok.

‘What? Why?’ asked Sabir, voice snapping with tension.

Kulok did not answer or pause. He was already moving down the passage, dropping down the plasteel stairs to the level below, eyes fixed on his path. A cluster of survivors flattened themselves against the wall as he went past. Some of them shouted after him, but he did not slow down. He paused as he passed a hatch door covered in yellow hazard stripes. He shoved it open. Racks of shotguns and lasguns lined the walls, gleaming black. He pulled a shotgun down, scooped up a box of solid shells, and kept moving, shoving rounds into the breach.

An unpleasant thought was emerging in his mind. He had been so relieved to make contact with other survivors that he had not thought whether anyone else had heard their signals. Part of him had assumed that whoever had murdered Tallarn was long gone, that they had left the corpse of a world to its fate. He had not seen any sign of anyone on the surface. When the other shelter had said to use encryption keys for the vox, he had barely registered the information. Now that fact screamed to him in time with the sound of his running feet.

He reached the inner hatch of the decontamination lock. The entrance chamber was empty. None of the other survivors liked going near the exit. The bulk of the carrier he had used to go to the surface sat on the rockcrete. Decontamination fluid, rad-scouring and the toxic fog had reduced the surface of its hull to a mottled and pitted grey. The inner door loomed above him, a huge circular plate of plasteel over twice his height in diameter. Pistons gripped its edges, and pipes

snaked from socks in its surface. A small porthole sat at its centre, set with glass as thick as the door itself. Kulok moved up to the glass and looked through.

He did not know what he expected to see. He was not entirely sure what he was doing, just that he suddenly felt the need to stand here, on the border between the life below and the hell above. Gloom filled the decontamination chamber on the other side of the porthole. Another porthole sat in the outer door directly opposite the one in the inner door. It was smaller, barely a hand span across. Sickly yellow light trickled through that narrow gap. Kulok watched it, his hands clammy on the grip of the shotgun. The fog folded and lapped over the view.

Something moved beyond the outer door. He squinted, breath held in his lungs. Was this them? Was this salvation? But then why had they not had vox contact yet? The shape grew in the outer porthole, casting its shadow through the murk.

The sound of running feet and gasping made him turn from the view. Sabir stumbled into the entrance chamber. Kulok took a step towards the older man, but Sabir pushed him away. The prefectus' face was red, his mouth wide as he sucked air and fought to speak.

'Signal…' Sabir gasped. 'A signal… came through…'

Kulok glanced back through the portholes. The angle was wrong, but he though he saw the light in the airlock chamber dim, as though something was blotting out the light from the outer porthole.

'It's them… the evacuation… force…'

Kulok stepped closer to the huge door. He glanced at the airlock controls set into the wall beside the door.

'They say…' Sabir coughed, his body quivering as he gulped air. 'There is…'

Kulok hesitated, the weight of the gun in his hands suddenly seeming foolish. He stepped towards the control panel.

'There is an enemy… and… and they… are…'

Kulok froze. Beyond the porthole something blotted out the light coming from the outer door.

'…coming.'

Sabir trembled and slid onto his knees. Kulok took a pace towards the inner door. He was bringing his head to look through the porthole when something hit the outer door with a sound like the shattering of mountains.

The lascannon beams reached through the building in front of Lycus' carrier and tore it apart. Plaster and rock exploded with heat. Plasteel girders folded like reeds as the building twisted under its own weight. The carrier lurched to one side. Rubble and dust cascaded down into the road. The hull of the war machine rang with impacts. Dust drowned Lycus' visual feed, and he blink-switched it to the carrier's auspex. Waves of distortion blurred the display. Flashes of weapon

detonations splashed amongst the static. The hull shapes of the Iron Warriors machines stood out like blade edges reflecting moonlight at night.

Lycus' squadron was rolling down a wide street. The shelter lay half a kilometre to their right. Rows of squat hab blocks ran along the road on both sides. The machine that had fired at them was running parallel to them, behind that screen of buildings. It was a Predator, one of a pair that the Iron Warriors transports had set down in the city before lifting off. Its twin was running with it, snapping out shots with its turret cannon and sponson guns. One road over again, the bloated bulk of an Iron Warriors Land Raider had vanished in the direction of the censorium shelter.

From a purely kill-tactic point of view, that was not a good position for the Iron Warriors. They had dropped three tanks: two light machines, and a heavy troop carrier. The Land Raider had moved directly towards the shelter, leaving its two lighter kin to face Lycus' squadron. The two Predators were fast killers in open terrain or with surprise or numbers on their side. In the graveyard of the Crescent City they had neither of those advantages. Lycus still had three war machines. Even the carrier he rode in carried twin lascannons, and enough armour to weather anything but a direct hit.

Riding close behind the carrier was the flak tank. Its cannons were not designed to engage ground targets, but they fired high explosive shells at a rate that made design and accuracy irrelevant. Then there was the Vanquisher. It was an apex killer of its kind. Given time, the Iron Warrior tanks would die. But Lycus did not have time. The Iron Warriors lay between Lycus and the shelter. They only had to buy enough time for the Land Raider and its cargo to do their work. It was a game that Lycus had already played out in his mind, and seen that he would lose. That was not something he could accept.

'Machine three,' he said across the vox. 'Static position. Fire sweep angles four-five through one-zero-three, immediate.'

'*Confirm,*' said the flak tank commander.

'Machine four,' snapped Lycus, 'advance on current heading, fire-free.' He held the connection long enough to hear the Vanquisher's confirmation and then switched to the carrier's internal vox. 'On my command, turn hard right, maximum speed.'

A second later, he heard the rolling roar as the flak tank opened up with its cannons. Halted in the middle of the road, its stabilisers extended, it was panning its cannons through a slow arc, punching shells through the skins of buildings into the road beyond. Lycus saw the splash of detonations as three shells hit one of the enemy Predators.

'Turn now,' he called. The human driver yanked the carrier to the right. The machine's engine screamed as power surged into the tracks. Its nose hit the wall

of the building just behind the flak tank's fire. It punched through, rockcrete dust exploding around it, ramming through internal walls, stone slabs exploding under its tracks. Above it, the building began to fall floor by floor, dust and fragments spinning through the air. Lycus' armour tensed as the shock waves rang through the machine. The troopers shook like puppets with their strings cut. Then the carrier hit the other wall and ripped through onto the road. Behind it, the building cascaded to the ground. A wave of dust rolled out, clotting the fog, rattling shards onto the road surface.

Lycus blinked his visual feed link to the carrier's infra sight. The world outside the tank became a painting in red and yellow on blue. They were between the two Iron Warriors Predators. Both machines glowed bright with engine heat. The turret of the nearest machine twisted towards the carrier, lascannons flashing white.

The Vanquisher shell hit the side of the Predator's turret and ripped it out of its collar. Smoke spilled out, bubbling with white heat. The second Predator was accelerating and turning, its turret tracking around to the carrier. The Iron Warriors inside would know that they could not survive this engagement, but they also knew that their sole task was to allow the Land Raider to reach the shelter. They would see that task done.

The barrel of the Predator's cannon turned towards the carrier. A shell hit the road beside its track. The Predator rocked as its gun fired again. The shell hit the carrier's flank and ricocheted off. The sound smacked through Lycus. A sharp ringing filled his skull. The troopers in the compartment shouted in shock and pain.

An opening between two buildings appeared before them. The carrier's engine roared as it plunged into the alley. Smoke from burning oil filled the compartment. Heavy rounds struck the block work behind them. Lycus blinked back to the auspex view – they were three hundred metres from the shelter, but the bright heat bloom of the Land Raider was already there. Above them, the tiers and domes of the censorium shadowed the fog, intact windows winking with the reflected light of explosions.

'*Marshal,*' came the voice of the flak tank commander. '*Multiple aerial units dropping from orbit. Estimate three lifters and four escort gunships.*'

'Engage at will,' said Lycus.

'*Locking targets and preparing to fire.*'

The vox stayed open long enough for Lycus to hear the first missile kicking free of the launcher. It would not be enough. They would take one of the Iron Warriors craft, two possibly, but the rest would reach the surface.

Kulok staggered backwards. The outer airlock door shook in its setting. He came to his feet. He could see something beyond the portholes, a looming slab shape

moving in the gloom. The thunder roll of impact came again, and then a scream of torn metal. Kulok was at the lock controls before he was fully aware of what he was doing.

‘What…’ yelped Sabir. ‘What are you doing?’

Kulok triggered the inner door release. Seals disengaged with a thump. Pistons began to pull the circular door upwards.

‘You will kill us all!’ shouted Sabir.

Kulok ducked under the opening door, and looked back at the prefectus. ‘Lock the inner door,’ he said.

Sabir did not move.

‘Now!’

Sabir pulled himself up and scrambled for the lock controls. The inner door reversed its opening and began to press close. Kulok turned to face the outer door. The lock was small, just wide enough to take a single vehicle or a clutch of people. Nozzle and focusing arrays dotted the oiled metal of the walls. Kulok was breathing hard, trying to focus some calm into his pulse as the door sealed shut behind him.

He did not know what he was doing. He was one man, unarmoured and barely armed. The moment the outer door was breached, he would have seconds to live before Tallarn’s air took him. He might have a moment to pull the trigger on his gun once, maybe twice. He would take those two seconds, and those shots. It was his mistake; he had insisted on going to the surface, on throwing a signal out onto the wind for someone, anyone to hear. Perhaps they would have all died in the shelter in a few weeks. Perhaps – as clear as it had seemed then, it was less so now. All that was certain was that everyone in the shelter – all the little clutches of shivering scribes and administrators – all of them would now die, and die because of him. One shot could not prevent that. No act so small could stop whatever death pounded on the door, but that did not matter. The deed alone mattered.

Metal thunder shook the air inside the lock as another blow struck the metal. The sound blurred into the shriek of tearing metal. Kulok was breathing hard, heart hammering. He stepped closer to the tiny porthole.

And looked.

Figures stood in the yellow gloom at the bottom of the entrance ramp. Figures that could have been men, but men were not sculpted from iron. They were huge; taller than anything should be that had such a shape. Their shoulders were hunched curves of dull metal. Curtains of chain hung from them, swaying as they drew back lightning wreathed fists to strike the door. Red light shone from the slots that were their eyes. Kulok knew what he was looking at, but the shock still caught the breath in his lungs. They were Space Marines. They were Terminators.

A Land Raider sat on the ramp above them, its weapon pods twitching. As Kulok watched, one of the Terminators turned, head rotating in its socket. The red slot of its eyes met Kulok's gaze. Its left fist ended in a pair of chain blades. The teeth blurred as they spun. Kulok froze, the gun in his hand hanging heavy. The Terminator raised its fist.

A flash of light split the gloom at the top of the ramp. The Land Raider rocked in place. Lightning whipped from the muzzles of its lascannons. Kulok blinked. Then there was a flash, and molten orange billowed into the fog as the Land Raider exploded. Flames rushed down the ramp. Pieces of armour struck the door as the blast wave hit. The Terminators were moving, gun arms rising as fire swallowed them.

'Machine kill!' called the Vanquisher commander over the vox. Lycus nodded. The kill had been good, exceptionally good in fact. The carrier's lascannons and the Vanquisher shell had struck the Land Raider in quick succession. The first had weakened the Land Raider's frontal armour. The second had torn the tank apart.

'Take us in,' said Lycus. 'Do we still have a vox link to the shelter?'

'Signal has failed, marshal,' called the carrier commander. 'But we won't reach the entrance anyway, sir. The wreckage is blocking the top of the ramp.'

Lycus blinked the auspex feed from his sight. The masked faces of the human soldiers looked back at him. They had heard the carrier commander's words, and all of them would knew what it meant.

'All troops, prepare to deploy,' said Lycus. 'We clear the area in front of the entrance. When that is clear, we proceed through the shelter entrance and decontaminate.'

There were no salutes, no gestures of dissent or protest. The soldiers simply did what their training had soaked into their flesh and blood. Weapon catches released. Hands checked grenades hanging from harnesses, tapped breathing tubes. Lycus watched them, struck for a moment by their discipline. They all knew what they were stepping into, what world of murder waited outside the carrier's hull. They knew, but still they did not hesitate or question.

'We need to reach the astropath. And we need time.' He pulled the plasma pistol from his thigh. It began to buzz, charge building in its coils. He thought of the days and steps that had brought him to this: the days of war and conquest, the victories won, and the dead looking back at him from the path of memory. He thought of Phall, of the blood of his brothers scattering into the void, and the silent roar of flame as warships drowned in the fires of death. The carrier lurched as it turned hard, engine gunning. The human soldiers shook.

He felt his mouth open, words forming on his lips, and then growling from his speaker grille.

‘You are warriors of the Emperor,’ he said. ‘War is choice, the choice to stand, the choice to fight, the choice to keep your oaths. You have chosen to be here, to stand here, to hold to the oaths we made to the future of mankind, and I would choose no others to stand with.’

The vox roared with the soldiers’ reply. The carrier slammed to a halt. Assault ramps hinged open. Fog-thickened air poured in. Lycus’ armour began to scream warnings: toxic, corrosive, viral. The soldiers charged through the fog. It began to eat at the soldiers, layers of vulcanised rubber peeling from their armour. The first one fell after two paces and hit the ground like a bag of fluid. The rest ran on. The wreck of the Land Raider was pouring fire and smoke towards the hidden sky. Bolt rounds roared out of the fog. Three soldiers fell at the same moment.

Targeting and threat markers spun in Lycus’ helmet display as he ran. The heat of the burning wreck sent ripples of static through his sight. Another human went down, jerking as he hit the ground, holes eaten in his air feeds. The fog shrouded the corpse as Lycus passed. He was at the front of the remaining soldiers, the slope of the ramp beneath his feet. A bolt round exploded against his shoulder. He stumbled, caught himself, brought his plasma pistol up and fired down the ramp. The shot was almost blind, but that did not matter; what did matter was pouring everything they could into the space that the bolt rounds were coming from.

‘Grenades,’ he shouted, the sound booming flat in the fog. Two frag grenades were in his hand. He heard another of the soldiers gasp and fall, flesh turning to sludge in failed armour. He threw the grenades and pulled his power sword from its scabbard. Explosions blossomed as he charged down the ramp.

Kulok watched the world become fire. In the seconds after the explosion the world beyond the porthole had become distant, as though he was watching a recording on a vid- screen. It was oddly quiet, the roar of explosives and gunfire locked behind the layers of plasteel. Every now and again the door shook, and the rumble of the explosions outside became metallic thunder, rolling through the still air within. Figures moved through the flame, blurred by speed and smoke. He saw the Terminators bracing, the flames washing them with soot. There were humans out there too, soldiers in bloated void armour firing beams through the smoke and flame. It was impossible, but there they were: standing on the surface of Tallarn, fighting, advancing as the air dissolved their armour.

A melta beam flicked out, struck a Terminator, and punched through armour and flesh. The Terminator reeled, struck the door, and the impact rang in Kulok’s ears. Another figure came down the ramp. It was another Space Marine, but in yellow armour. The sword in his hand spat sparks into the fog. The Terminators braced and fired as one. Bolters hammered into the charging warrior. Splinters of yellow lacquer and ceramite scattered from the lone Space Marine. He did not stop. Another melta blast stuck one of the Terminators. Energy beams struck its

squad mates like rain. The yellow warrior was within blade range. A Terminator with a chainfist met the charge.

Sword and spinning teeth kissed. Sparks and lightning lit the smoke-shadowed air. Vast strengths strained against each other as the weapons locked. The Terminator shrugged, the movement rippling with strength. The sword sheered free of its chain fist. The yellow warrior backhanded his sword into the side of the Terminator's leg. It was not a deep cut, barely enough to splinter the shin plate, but it was enough to crack the thinner armour at the back of the knee. The Terminator brought his fist up, froze and began to fall as the air of Tallarn found the flesh within the skin of iron.

The warrior in yellow was firing before the Terminator struck the floor. Blasts of plasma spat from his pistol. Sheets of volkite energy were coming down the ramp from a line of advancing human soldiers. A Terminator ran at them. It was fast, shockingly fast for something so big. Beams shattered on its armour like drops of rain on hot steel. It struck one of the soldiers and the human burst apart. The rest fired at it. They were so close that the muzzles of their guns were almost touching their target. The Terminator was burning, but did not fall. It swung its fist wide. Bodies fell, broken, blood congealing to black as it met the air.

The warrior in yellow aimed and fired. The burst of plasma bolts struck the Terminator in the back. Metal blistered and flashed to gas, and the Terminator was falling, fist swinging like a toy automaton.

The yellow-armoured warrior turned, aim sweeping to the last Terminator before the door, but that last enemy was too fast. Bolt rounds hammered into the warrior's legs, and now he was falling, and the Terminator was coming forwards, and the rain of volkite and melta fire was slackening.

Kulok heard himself shout. The sound rang through the lock. It was a cry of terror and pleading for the universe to stop, for the scene playing out before his eyes to prove false.

He watched the Terminator raise its fist above the fallen warrior in yellow. On the ramp above it, the figure of a lone human soldier swayed, gun firing even as it fell from its hand. The beam struck the Terminator. It hesitated for a second, as though stung, and then punched down. The blow never landed. The yellow-armoured warrior rolled aside and stabbed upwards. The power sword punched through the Terminator's eye slot and into the face beneath. The helm exploded with a whip crack of white light.

The warrior stood, slowly, armour grey and smoking. Behind him, fire rolled in the fog. He turned to look at the door. Kulok met the blank green gaze of the helm.

Radiation and liquid poured over Lycus. The rad-scrubbers and fluid vents spun around him again, drenching him, stripping virus and matter from his armour.

None of the human soldiers had made it to the door. He alone stood and waited for the decontamination to finish and the inner door to open. The rings set into the walls spun one last time, then froze. Fluid dripped from the nozzles and steam rose from his armour. It was heavily damaged. He estimated that he had had another twenty seconds before a joint seal would have corroded and failed. Warnings pulsed at the side of his sight, and the servos in his legs clattered and whined as he stepped up to the inner door.

A broad-faced man was watching him from the other side of a glass porthole. The man had thin, feather-line scars down his cheek and the look of strength softened at the edges. His eyes were steady though: a fighter's eyes.

The inner door hissed open. Lycus stepped across, pulling his helm free and breathing in the smell of the shelter: rockcrete, hot wiring and poorly filtered air.

The man with the eyes of a soldier looked at him. He had a shotgun in his hand, a finger on the trigger guard, but the barrel carefully point at the floor. Another man in the clothes of a prefectus in the local administration stood against the wall, eyes wide, face pale.

'I am Lycus,' he said.

'You have come for us?' asked the man with the shotgun, not moving. 'You heard us? You have come for us?'

'Where is the astropath?' asked Lycus.

'How are we getting out? Are there more of you coming?'

Lycus took a half step forward.

'What is your name?' he asked the man with the shotgun.

'I am Kulok.'

Lycus nodded. 'Where is the astropath, Kulok? There is not much time. I need to go to him now.'

Kulok did not reply, and Lycus thought he saw something flicker in the human's gaze.

Then the man nodded and turned. 'Follow me, lord,' he said.

They hurried through the tunnels of the shelter. Lycus saw faces in side tunnels, eyes staring at him as he followed Kulok. The shelter was not large, but it was almost deserted. He could smell the build-up of pollutants and carbon dioxide in the air. A few more days and everybody in the shelter would suffocate. His vox hissed snatches of information at him from the commander of the Vanquisher on the surface. The carrier was gone. Its internal seals had failed after Lycus had disembarked. A saturation rocket strike had taken out the flak tank two minutes ago. Only the Vanquisher remained. The enemy drop ships were on the ground. Multiple armoured units were converging on the shelter.

'Here,' said Kulok as they reached a heavy door. The room beyond was small. Racks of parchment hid the walls. The last astropath on Tallarn lay in a tangle of

blankets, blind sockets fixed on the ceiling above, mouth forming silent words.

Lycus became still, his hurried movements fading to stillness.

‘He has been like this for the last few hours,’ said Kulok. ‘Before that, he was comatose.’ The human paused. ‘I have no idea what he is saying when he speaks.’

Lycus nodded without breaking his gaze on the astropath. He knelt down beside the withered figure. Static and snatches of words cracked from the vox set in his collar. He ignored them.

‘What is his name?’ he asked.

‘Halakime, apparently, but…’

Lycus raised his hand and Kulok went quiet.

‘Astropath Halakime,’ said Lycus.

The astropath’s lips kept moving, but there was no sign that he had heard his name.

‘Astropath, I am Marshal Lycus of the Seventh Legion Astartes. Can you hear me?’

The astropath did not move.

Lycus opened his mouth to speak again.

‘Wait,’ said Kulok, and moved around Lycus. Slowly, as though he was reaching to pick up a sleeping snake, Kulok reached out and took one of the astropath’s withered hands. ‘We are here,’ said Kulok. ‘They have come for us, for you. Can you hear us?’

Lycus watched the astropath’s face. The veins running across the scalp were blue threads in translucent white. Kulok looked at Lycus.

The astropath’s hand spasmed shut around Kulok’s. His body snapped ridged. Lycus heard joints pop.

‘Dust, dry, dust, dry, no water, only dust and darkness!’ the astropath shouted, his voice high and shrill. ‘Darkness below, darkness at the root of the world, and the eye beyond, the eye within sees and seeks and knows–’

‘Halakime!’ Lycus roared the name, and it thundered around the small room.

Kulok jerked back as though he had been struck. The astropath twitched, shivered and the words babbling from his lips drained away.

‘My name…’ said the astropath. ‘Where am… What is…’

‘Astropath Halakime,’ said Lycus again, his voice low. ‘I am Marshal Lycus of the Seventh Legion Astartes. I need you to listen to me.’

The astropath shivered and went still. The pits of his eyes fixed on Lycus, and the Space Marine had the sensation that the man was looking through him.

‘I hear you, son of stone,’ said Halakime, and his voice was steady.

‘Do you know where you are?’

‘Tallarn, or at least that was where I was.’

‘You are still on Tallarn,’ said Lycus. ‘The world is dead, and you are the last of your kind here.’

‘Dust…’ said the old man. ‘I saw the dust blowing in the wind.’

‘Those loyal to the Imperium need to know what has happened here. They need to know that the Iron Warriors are here.’ Behind him, Lycus heard Kulok’s breath leave his lungs.

Halakime shivered.

‘I…’ he began. ‘The wind, the night… It will take…’

‘Whatever it takes, word must reach them.’ Lycus watched as the astropath bowed his head.

‘I…’ began the astropath. ‘To project a message form requires preparation. I do not have a meaning source.’

Lycus released the armour seal on his right wrist, and pulled his gauntlet free. The astropath’s hand was cold as Lycus gripped it. An electric tingle passed up his nerves.

‘Take what you need to understand,’ said Lycus.

Halakime shivered. The lips pulled back from his teeth. Fire burned through Lycus. Smoke and mist breathed from the astropath’s mouth. Pain yanked Lycus’ thoughts. Frost grew on their clasped hands. Their thoughts blurred, mixed, flowed like burning oil and freezing water.

He was a boy watching the thoughts of those around him dance in haloes…

He was a warrior standing on the walls of Catulon, the shells of his autocannon pouring into the beasts below…

He was a robed neophyte kneeling as his eyes boiled away under the gaze of a being that was less than a god, more than a man…

He was standing on the deck of the *Light of Inwit* as the Iron Warriors boarding pods bit through the hull…

He was…

…holding Halakime’s hand, his flesh crawling with heat.

‘I have enough,’ said the astropath. ‘I will send the message.’

Lycus nodded, and stood. A low rumble growled through the air, and the ceiling shook.

‘I will give you what time I can,’ said Lycus, and turned to leave the room.

‘This was it, wasn’t it?’ said Kulok from behind him. Lycus did not stop moving. His hand pulled his plasma pistol free, and he checked the charge coils. ‘There is not going to be an evacuation, is there? You came here because of the astropath, and only because of him. We are not going to survive.’

Lycus paused and looked back at the man.

‘Word must get out. Tallarn’s fate must be heard,’ he said. ‘You have served the Emperor well. You will be remembered.’

Kulok held Lycus' gaze, and then shook his head.

'No,' he said, and walked past Lycus. 'No, I won't. But I will stand with you.'

Kulok pulled the envirosuit on. It was clammy against his skin. The breath feed snapped into place, and cool air flowed across his face. He checked the harnesses holding the oxygen bottle across his back and picked the shotgun up. Twelve solid rounds: he doubted he would be able to reload wearing the suit's heavy gloves. He snorted to himself. Once Tallarn's killing air was inside the shelter he doubted he would have time to reach the end of the shotgun's clip.

'What is happening?' said Sabir. Kulok had not heard the prefectus enter the armoury. 'What are you doing?' Kulok turned, and shouldered past Sabir. 'What is–'

Kulok looked at him, and the man stepped back, blinking. There were tears on the prefectus' cheeks. He held the older man's glistening stare, and then turned and began to run.

He reached the airlock to find Lycus standing before it. His sword was drawn, his pistol in his hand.

There was a boom, and light flashed through the porthole. Dust fell like fine snow from the roof.

'Shaped krak charges,' said Lycus, his voice growling flat from his helm grille. 'They are cutting and blasting sequentially, creating fault lines in the door. They will be through the first door soon.'

As though in answer to those words, the inner airlock door rang like a gong. Kulok swallowed, his throat dry. He saw a shape moving on the other side of the inner porthole. A slab, armoured face looking in. A blinding beam of light flared across the porthole. Molten crystal began to weep down the circle of crystal as the beam bored deeper. The door shook.

'Will this…' began Kulok, and found his voice catching in his lips. 'Will this make a difference?'

Lycus looked at him, green lenses bright in the bare ceramite of his helm.

'Yes,' he said after a moment. 'Every act of defiance matters.'

'To the Imperium?'

'To existence.'

Kulok looked back at the door. The porthole was a circle of molten orange. Three other points to either side of the centre were glowing cherry red as the cutters bit deeper. Another metal roar shook the quiet.

'What were you?' asked Lycus.

Kulok looked up at Lycus with surprise. The Space Marine tilted his head to the side. 'Before this, what were you?'

Kulok shrugged. 'An evader of taxes.'

A low growl came from Lycus, getting louder as the warrior's armour shook. After a second, Kulok realised that the Space Marine was laughing.

Lycus brought his plasma pistol up to aim at where the airlock door was staring to blister yellow. Kulok raised his shotgun, braced, finger tense on the trigger.

The airlock door blew in. White hot shards of metal and crystal flew inwards in a wash of smoke and tainted air.

Kulok fired five rounds before Tallarn pulled his flesh from his bones and sent his memory out into the realm of the dead.

They heard.

Across the star-dotted vaults of space, astropaths woke from their trances with images of iron giants striding through dead cities and silence. Shivering, they unravelled the sensations of their dreams, and the allegorical meanings shouted in their minds with the fury of a last, dying scream.

'Come to us,' *it said.* 'The Iron Warriors are here. Tallarn is dead. Its grave will be the anvil upon which you break them.'

They heard.

On the bridge of the Lament of Caliban, *they heard.*

In the Conclave of Iron, the Princeps of the Legio Gryphonicus and the Myrmidon Lords of Zelth heard.

Amidst the silence of the Nerren gulf, the ships of Niobe the Castigator heard.

Alone in the tower of his war-barque, Tempis Lor – General of Seventy Thousand Swords – heard.

And in a hundred more quiet places, a thousand more, the loyal warriors of Emperor heard. And one by one, they rose to answer the siren call of war.

IRONCLAD

263 days after the death of Tallarn [unconfirmed estimate]

‘Victory is a child of many parents. Defeat is an orphan.’

– ancient Terran aphorism, origin unknown

‘To know war we should ask the dead how they ended, not the living how they endured.’

– General Zavier Gorn, recorded remarks

‘To think that we know everything is a condition of the human mind. The animal within us cannot tolerate the possibility that knowledge is a matter of selection, judgement a matter of focus, clarity a consequence of exclusion.
There is not one truth.
Reality does not break along clean lines.’

– Precepts of the Vanus Temple, Officio Assassinorum

PART ONE
SEEKERS

Night fell across the face of Tallarn, and the war machines followed the dying light. Dust rose in their wake as the drying ground powdered under their tracks. If any living thing could have stood on the surface of Tallarn and survived, they would have heard the approach of the machines long before they saw them. Spread out in long lines, or clustered together, they covered the dark ground in a carpet of armour. It was not an army. Such a name could not touch its nature.

It was a host.

They had come from dozens of the buried shelters across Tallarn, war machines bearing the scars of war like honours bestowed by great kings. Between them walked the automata of the Mechanicum, and above them the god machines of the Titan Legions strode. Signals crackled between them, swarming invisibly through the air.

Far behind the advancing host, men and women waited in small rooms filled with the voices that scratched from speaker grilles. Few spoke, most simply waited and listened. There was nothing they could do now. All the weeks of planning, preparation and coordination were unfolding across the dead land above. Some twitched with nervousness. Others simply stared into space with the dead eyes of people who were trying not to feel anything. A few slept, slumped over their consoles, in spite of the power of the moment. No one woke them. Sleep would be banished soon enough.

In the time since the first loyalist forces had reached Tallarn there had been two attempts to do what they now were trying to do again. This night would be the third attempt to break the Iron Warriors foothold on the surface of Tallarn, and bring the battle to an end.

ONE

Waking
Arrival
Sight

‘War Anvil, *confirm unit status.*’ The voice from the vox filled Kord’s ears.

‘Closing on waypoint,’ he replied, keeping his eyes on the auspex screen. ‘No enemy sighted.’

‘*Attack pattern one, confirmed.*’

‘Confirmed,’ Kord’s voice was low, steady. ‘We are at the kill edge.’

‘*Good fortune*, War Anvil.’

He did not reply to the sign-off. The rattle of his machine filled the silence which followed.

It was dark inside the hull. His breath had fogged the eyepieces of his enviro-suit. Six straight hours skinned inside the suit, breathing from tanks of air, unable to move more than a few inches; it was all so familiar that he had trouble thinking of how else war could be fought.

His machine was an old Malcador assault tank, its class named for one of the Emperor’s closest courtiers. No doubt the man was a fine example of everything that was best about people who never had to see those who stood in the excrement beneath them. The tank was a brute though, with a name to match. She was called *War Anvil*, and was an ugly slab of tracks, armour and jutting gun barrels. A battle cannon stuck out from a turret high on her back, and a wide-mouthed demolisher cannon from a mount on her forward hull. Two lascannons nested in sponsons on the tank’s flanks. A crew of six worked inside its hull. The primary gunner and crew squeezed into a space just in front of the commander’s nest, so close that Kord could tap each of them on the shoulder without reaching. The machine’s drive and ammunition took up most of its bulk, with the sponson gunners isolated behind crawl hatches on either side of a cramped central compartment. Both the forward gunner and driver were wedged down behind the front armour plates with just room enough for them not to be killed by the demolisher’s recoil.

It was a reliable, but ill-designed creature. The battle cannon had a limited forward traverse arc, and the sponsons could not cover the machine’s rear arc. Get behind it, and *War Anvil*’s armour counted for nothing. There had been a joke amongst the Jurnian officer corps that the Malcador hull was an ‘assault tank’

because no one could think of another use for a machine whose guns could only fire forwards. That did not matter to Kord. *War Anvil* had gotten him out of the fall of the Sapphire City, and made five kills in the process. Since then it had never failed, for all its age and flaws. If he had a home then *War Anvil*'s cramped and corroding insides was it.

And now we are going back to what remains of the city we fled, he thought. He blinked away a bead of sweat running into his eye, and rechecked the unit markers on the screen. All of his machines were there, rolling forward in a line half a kilometre wide. Executioners, Vanquishers, and all the other mismatched assortment that was now his regiment: the leavings, the dregs, the survivors. In truth it was barely company strength, but he was still a Colonel Commander, and rank meant that certain formalities followed, even out here, on the dead edge of existence.

'*This is not going to work*,' Sacha's voice lilted over the internal vox. He ignored it, just like he had ignored the goodwill sign-off from command. There was, quite frankly, no point in replying to either. He thumbed the unit vox, and winced as it shrieked in his ears.

'All units, this is *War Anvil*. We are in the attack path, estimate time to outer defence units two minutes.'

The acknowledgements came. Kord counted them off as he heard each call sign. Even if a machine was still moving, and showing an identification signal, that did not mean its crew were alive. Sometimes the seals went on a tank's hatches, and the virus-laden air would eat through the crew's air feeds without them noticing. Tanks had rolled on for kilometres with their crew dead inside them, their drivers' dead hands still pressing the drive levers.

'How much have we got out here?' It was Sacha again. She was resting her head on the breech of the battle cannon. He did not look at her. The screen in front of him was more important than her need to talk her nerves out. 'I mean,' she carried on, 'how many machines are in just this wave? Five hundred? A thousand? Throne, that's just us tank riders. I heard the Titans are walking for this. That's enough rolling iron to shake the ground all the way back to the stars.' She laughed nervously. 'They just expect the Iron Warriors not to have spotted it?'

Kord was watching the distance to their waypoint count down across the auspex screen. He keyed the external vox.

'All units–'

'I mean, is this plan just based on us being dumb, or them being dumber?'

'Light weapons and fire free. Anything in front of us is a target. Repeat, light weapons, fire free.'

Sacha sat up and rolled her shoulders and neck, the heavy folds of her enviro-suit squeaking as they rubbed together.

‘And if they are not dumb–’

‘Sacha,’ he said, leaning in to press his eyes against the forward sight.

‘Yeah?’

‘Load the gun, and then be quiet.’

A second later he felt the thump as the cannon’s breech closed on a shell. Explosive, and incendiary; he did not need to check that Sacha had remembered the mission briefing. Her inability to shut up had nothing to do with her memory, or how she handled the main cannon.

‘Fog’s not thinned.’ It was Saul. Kord could almost hear the forward gunner trying to force down his fear and fatigue. Kord squinted into the swirling green light of his own gunsight, and keyed the regimental vox.

‘*Razor*, this is *War Anvil*, what can you see?’

‘*Nothing, looks clear,*’ Origo’s voice came back straight away, clipped and sharp, *‘but they are there. I know.’*

Kord nodded. Origo’s scout squadron was half a kilometre in front of them, spread out and watching for the enemy.

‘Never a good start,’ muttered Sacha.

‘Passing waypoint one,’ called Mori from the driver’s nest. Kord took a slow breath, counted long seconds as he breathed it out again. Just in front of him Zade leaned into the battle cannon’s sight, and flicked the guard off the firing trigger.

Kord keyed the regimental-wide vox.

‘Okay, let’s light this up. All units on my word.’ He was sighting into the murk which boiled across the forward sight. ‘The word is Vengeance.’ He pulled the trigger, and the dark, shrouded world became a sheet of light.

The air of Isstvan V was fire. Hrend could not see the horizon. A firestorm rolled above and around Hrend. The shrill of his armour’s integrity and heat alarms had ceased several minutes before. He could feel coldness creeping across his flesh. He was breathing fumes and smoke but he could not smell them. He felt like shivering despite the flames all around. He knew what that meant. The air in his lungs, in his nose, in his throat, was burning him from the inside. The seals around his waist and knees had melted, and the fire was seeping in. He was cooking inside his armour. He was dying.

‘Iron within…’ he rasped, feeling blisters form on his lips and tongue.

He kept wading forward, armour hissing and shrieking as it fought against damage. The ground sucked at his legs as he forced himself towards the cover of the wreck of a… He was not sure what it had been, a Rhino perhaps, but his helmet visor had dimmed to near blackness, and the wreck was a twisted shell. The vox scratched in his ear, but he knew better than to respond. It was just a

ghost of distortion, the inferno laughing at him for his defiance. He was alone out here, in the swamp made by the burning blood of his brothers and their war machines.

'Iron without…'

He had failed. That much was clear. Surrounded, betrayed and outnumbered, the Raven Guard and Salamanders were doomed. But they still had teeth to bite back with. He should have anticipated how they would respond. He should have deployed differently. He should… He should have died when the first rocket salvoes hit. That was the reward he had earned by his weakness, and if he ended now it would only be because he had proved weak again.

He reached the wreck. The edges of its shattered hull were glowing like metal pulled from a forge.

'Iron…' he heaved a burning breath. His vision blurred as the moisture cooked in his eyeballs. 'Iron…' He slid to the floor, and the fire closed over him… burning…

'*Master.'* The word sent a buzz of pain through him, and the dream of Isstvan melted into waking. For a second he felt as if he were drowning, as if warm, black water were all around him. Then his nerves reconnected him to the Dreadnought, and he was ironclad again. The remains of his body flickered with a memory of pain. For a second the weak core of his being wanted to scream.

'*Master,*' the voice came again.

Waking was worse than dying.

Silence surrounded him. When he had been alive, before he had been reborn as a Dreadnought, he had never noticed the soft clamour that life made: the beat of hearts and blood, the rise and fall of breath, the almost imperceptible noises of muscle and bone moving together. When he woke now it was to blank nothingness.

Slowly he activated the Dreadnought's senses. Sound came first. The wind whistled around him. Then he became aware of his limbs, of the pistons and servos waiting for his will, of the weapons which were part of him. Last he activated the sensor pod set into the sarcophagus like a helm in a suit of armour. He looked out through his machine's eyes. Through *his* eyes.

Fog swirled in the green murk before him. Rangefinders, infra-sensors and auspex arrays began to overlay his sight. He could see the enemy now. Distant pinpricks of heat growing brighter as they came closer.

'*Master, do you hear?'* The voice broke through the moan of the wind.

'I hear,' he said, feeling the machine take the words from the flayed nerves of his throat and cast them across the vox.

'*The enemy are advancing,*' said the voice. *Jarvak*, he thought, watching the input from his machine senses scroll across his view in columns of data. All of

the war machines of his command were in position, scattered through the ruins around him. They had been waiting for twenty hours, three minutes, and forty-five seconds precisely. Jarvak had woken him at the correct time.

Hrend watched the enemy advance. The pattern of their deployment was not ideal, and their formation lacked precision. They had also yet to detect Hrend or any of his force. Part of him wondered why they were attacking in this way. It was hopeless. The Sightless Warren would not fall. It was born of iron, and guarded by iron, and would never fail.

'Stand ready,' he said.

'By your will,' came the reply from Jarvak.

Hrend saw the data-stream change as the status of the three Predators, and two Venators changed to active. Their systems were still half dormant, their heat and electronic signatures small enough that they should be invisible to auspexes. At least that was the intention. That left his two ironclad brothers.

'Orun? Gortun?' he spoke their names. No reply came for a second.

'I wake, master.' Orun's voice was flat and metallic. It was the mirror of Hrend's own voice.

Gortun's answer was a growl of static.

Hrend watched and waited until the enemy units were on the edge of the kill zone created by his group's guns.

'Iron,' he said, and then paused. A squall of dull blackness pulled at him, and somewhere he felt the cartilage of his charred throat try and form the next word. 'Within.'

'Iron without,' came the reply from his brothers.

The gunship launched as its parent strike ship skimmed close to Tallarn. In the craft's cockpit Argonis watched as warning lights washed his view of Tallarn's orbit.

The planet looked like a ball of rancid yellow fat, shot through with smudges of smoke. Wreckage caged its orbits, glittering in long streams and banks of twisted metal. The fires of a void battle glittered above the planet's northern polar region. It looked like a big fight to Argonis's eyes. He corrected his course to ensure that they would come nowhere near the battle-sphere, locked onto his primary target, and pushed the engines to maximum thrust. Locked into the pilot rig, encased in power armour, he felt the hammer blow of full burn as a growing pressure.

'*Advise-warn you, current engine burn and trajectory will result in damage*,' Sota-Nul's voice scratched in his ears. He did not reply. He had not asked her to link into the gunship, but it was inevitable that she would. For a human supposedly divested of emotion in favour of pure logic she was remarkably

predictable. ‘*Probability of engine output degradation currently at eighty-five point two-one*,’ she added after a moment. ‘*Estimated*.’

He did not reply. There was no point.

His target was coming up fast. The outer picket ships of the *Iron Blood*’s first defence envelop were growing from distant dots to slabs of metal picked out in starlight. He threw the gunship into an irregular spiral, and watched two warning runes flick from amber to red in his helmet display.

‘Combat display active,’ he said, and space all around him became a network of blue, red and green arcs of potential targets. They disregarded warships of course; he doubted if even the smallest of them would notice if he fired at them.

‘Auspexes and multiple targeting arrays have locked onto us.’

‘Transmit the identification signal,’ he said.

‘Compliance,’ droned the tech-witch. ‘Suggest we cut speed, alter course to a steady trajectory, and disable weapons.’

‘No,’ he said, without pause. ‘Transmit the signal, and then see if they still think the best course of action is to blow us out of the void.’

The outer picket ships were now vast cliffs blocking out the sight of Tallarn and the light of its star. Beyond them the inner shell of ships waited, and within their sphere the vast, notched chisel outline of the *Iron Blood*.

He yanked the gunship into a jagged skid and flicked into a spiral, as the tones of target locks grew in his ears.

He waited, feeling the familiar tug of G-force at his flesh inside his armour. He had missed this, had missed the feeling of mingled control and danger singing in his senses. It made him feel alive again, and let him forget how close he had come to death at the hands of his lord. There was another reason to dance through the Iron Warriors gun sensors. Skimming in, weapons live, targeters active, daring them to fire and then cutting them dead: it was a message, a statement of intent. Do not confuse might with power, it said.

Still, he would not like to have to do this in reality.

‘The Fourth Legion vessels have dropped their target lock,’ said Sota-Nul.

‘Good.’

‘They are hailing us.’

‘Give me the vox.’

‘Compliance.’

Static popped in his ears, rose in pitch and then faded.

‘*The warships and warriors of the Fourth Legion welcome you, honoured emissary.*’ The voice paused. Argonis thought he recognised it, the sour tone, the sharp edges used to command but not to courtesy. Forrix, of course. Not the Lord of Iron, not yet, not until they were sure why Argonis was here.

‘*From whom do you come?*’ asked Forrix’s voice carefully.

Behind the black faceplate of his helm, Argonis smiled without pleasure.

‘I come from the Warmaster,’ he replied.

Iaeo opened all her eyes, and began to hunt. The info-verse surrounded her. Images, pict-feeds and abstract data extended off into a holo-hazed distance. Ninety-eight out of her ninety-nine data-taps were still in place, the lost one an unfortunate consequence of the Iron Warriors strike against the signal cable node south of the ruins of the Crescent City. That was not optimal, but not as bad as it might have been.

She looked through her scattered swarm of net-flies, and her vision spilt into facets. She had loosed the tiny creatures into the shelter complex sixteen hours before, when she began to think that *they* might have found her. The chromed insects sat in key positions throughout the shelter. They watched without ceasing, parsing every face they saw and hearing every voice.

The shelter complex was vast. Like all the shelters buried across Tallarn, it had been intended to host the mustering of armies for conquering the star systems. Now those same shelters housed the survivors of a viral bombardment which had killed all life on the surface. In the rockcrete-lined tunnels a lucky few had survived, and then struck back at the destroyers of their world. It was a battle fought in hell for revenge.

The shelter Iaeo watched was one of the largest in loyalist hands, and it lay below the ruins of a city. She had been here since the fall of the Sapphire City, and the arrival of the first loyalist reinforcements to come to Tallarn. Before that she had been on Tallarn for a year, moving through the world above, ghosting through data looms, watching with her swarm eyes, drawing a web to snare her target. Her target had been a cell of Alpha Legion operatives, who were working through worlds on the margins of the greater war. The cell specialised in subverting, corrupting, sabotaging worlds of potential, but not current, strategic importance. They were not a target she had been given, but one she had identified and selected herself. That concept still made her uncomfortable.

Assassins of the Vanus Temple usually operated remotely, manipulating events through altering data to bring about the termination of a target. The noble killed by a jealous lover, after the discovery of rather explicit pict images; the cartel bosses eliminated by their business partners, when they discovered evidence of theft; the city wiped out by a plague because the shipment of vaccine, which would have saved it, never arrived – all these were the murder trade of the Vanus Temple, and, for most, the executioner did not have to see their target, or set foot on the killing ground. In fact most of Iaeo’s clade siblings did not take to the field. Direct methods were the preserve of the other Temples, but occasionally one of the Vanus Temple was designated as an Unbound Infocyte, and became an exception to the rule. It was not a condition set lightly.

An Unbound Infocyte both designated and executed their targets. Once they had eliminated one target they selected another, and so on, extrapolating from termination to termination, until their Unbound Condition was withdrawn. Death at the hand of a Vanus was normally ordained and delivered with the remoteness of an angel enacting the will of a deity. To be Unbound was to be both the eyes that saw and the hand that cut.

Iaeo had been placed under an Unbound Condition two years before, and had been killing ever since. Sometimes she thought of her current state as akin to the virus which had killed Tallarn: multiplying and changing, creating death without end. She understood why it was necessary in a war like this, but she did not like it. It lacked definition.

As the shelter filled her senses, she let it linger for a second at the edge of consciousness. No, there was nothing unusual, and she saw no change in the macro patterns of data. She focused on the shelter's command room. It looked crowded. From her viewpoint she could see the strain on the faces, the lines of tension turned to gullies of shadow in the low light. No one was talking. She heard the rustle of fabric as someone shifted their weight. The comms officers, hunched over signal equipment, were glass-eyed with fatigue. She could almost taste the brittleness in the room. It would be five more minutes before reports from the attack on the Sightless Warren would come in, and another hour before the commanders could begin to gauge victory or defeat.

It would be defeat, though. Iaeo knew that already. The Iron Warriors knew the attack was coming. They had probably known before most of the loyalist forces now rumbling towards their attack positions. It still had to play out, but Iaeo did not doubt her projection.

She flicked between other viewpoints: the muster chambers, empty apart from a few machines too damaged to be on the surface, the billet chambers where a few slept under worn blankets, the lifts of the shelter's main axis shaft. Nothing. Not even the beginning of a hint that she had been right. But the feeling was still there, just like before, itching at the edge of awareness. Somewhere in this complex there was at least one high-grade Alpha Legion operative, and they knew that Iaeo was there too.

She was of the Vanus, an assassin of information. She dealt with possibility, with projected outcomes and webs of data. Uncertainty vexed her, but absences worried her more. And that was what looked back at her from the data: a blankness where there should be something, as though someone had edited it out from reality. The Alpha Legion was here, and they did not even cast a shadow.

That was not optimal. Not at all. That meant they were close, that they had a read on her actions. There was even the possibility that…

She pulled the visor from her eyes, folded and stowed it, then slid down the air duct towards an access grate in the duct's floor. The grate slid out of its housing and she dropped into the empty corridor below.

At least it had been empty two seconds before.

She saw the three figures as she dropped from the ceiling. All were utterly still, their shapes blurred outlines of grey, like graphite smeared on paper. Deductions spun through her mind in the stretched instant of the jump.

They must have been there for some time, long enough for their cloaked presences to dissolve into the data feed from her net-flies. Long enough that she had not seen them. That meant they had planned this. They had tracked her and predicted her actions.

Clever, she thought, as she heard the buzz of arming weapons.

She hit the floor.

Their enemies had given the Iron Warriors fortress its name. They called it the Sightless Warren. It had grown from the broken shelter beneath the Sapphire City, spreading underground as the Iron Warriors captured more shelters and tunnel networks. Though they knew it was huge, none amongst the loyalist forces knew the Sightless Warren's true size.

Beneath the ground it was possible for Perturabo's forces to pass unseen, and emerge in the ruins of cities or in the empty, fog-shrouded wastelands. Artful concealment protected most of the peripheral entrances, their ramps and blast doors hidden in the shells of buildings, or in folds in the ground. The main gates to the Warren sat amongst the corpses of cities, ringed by slaved weapon emplacements, mazes of mines and the eyes of tank patrols. From its heart in the ruins of the Sapphire City to the outlying bunkers on the heights above the black sludge of the Crescent Ocean, the Sightless Warren ran for hundreds of kilometres.

Victory for the loyalists while the Sightless Warren existed seemed impossible. So it was determined that it must fall, and the strength of thousands were sent to see it done. In six months they had tried twice and failed. Victory in the third attempt, as had been said of the first and second attempts, was beyond question.

TWO

Machine war
Lord of Iron
Combat projection

Kord could barely see or hear. Metallic thunder rolled through *War Anvil*. Every surface was vibrating. The sounds of the engines hammered against the ring of shrapnel and the beat of explosions. He kept his eyes to the ground in front of *War Anvil*. He was using his own eyes. Infra-sight had become useless after the first seconds of engagement. Shapes, shadows and light crowded his eyes as he tried to keep his gaze steady. He could see a target, could see the chipped chevrons crossing its hull. Throne, it was close.

‘Zade!’ he shouted.

‘Firing!’ the gunner replied, and the battle cannon shouted its wrath into the chorus of battle. The shell hit the Iron Warriors tank square on the front of its left track and ripped down its side. The breech block snapped back in front of Kord. Sacha was already yanking it open, ramming the next shell into its mouth. The Iron Warriors tank was slewing around, its left track shredding.

‘Saul, finish it!’ he shouted. *War Anvil* bucked as the forward demolisher cannon fired. The Iron Warriors tank vanished in a plume of rolling fire. Kord was already pulling his eyes from the forward sight, glancing down at the cracked screen of the auspex. It was a mess.

Runes and tactical markers swarmed through distortion. His regiment still held together, but only just. They had taken some hits, but were still pressing forward; however, their eastern flank had been struck from the side and ripped in two. Its lead vehicles were wrecks and those behind them were bottling up as they tried to get around their dead comrades. From the moment they had fired the first shells the assault plan had started to fall apart. The ruins of what had been the Sapphire City, now an irregular plateau of debris, had welcomed them with mines, concealed tank snares, heavy weapon fire, and counter-assault groups ready and waiting. They had not even made the second waypoint yet. The second wave was coming up behind them hard, and they were running out of space. They should have been within a kilometre of the Sightless Warren’s outer entrances by now. They were nowhere near that close. Ten minutes from the first shot and the attack looked like a disaster.

‘Bastards knew we were coming,’ Sacha shouted, as though she had read his thoughts. She yanked the handle of the breech block down, and it slammed shut. Zade was already traversing the cannon. Kord could hear the gunner swearing into the vox without pause.

All of *War Anvil*’s other weapons were firing, sponsons whipping energy out into the chaos. Saul would be dragging another shell into the demolisher’s maw. Something hit the back of the hull. Kord’s eyes flicked to the runes identifying his regiment’s machines. *Claw* and *Razor* should have dropped back to cover *War Anvil*’s rear arc. He saw *Claw*’s rune fade out, the heat of its death blooming across the auspex screen.

‘Claw*’s out,’* Origo’s voice cracked across the vox from the remaining scout. *‘Enemy machines to our rear.’*

‘Understood,’ replied Kord. For a second he closed his eyes. This attack was dead and done, and now it was just a matter of what the price was, and who paid it. ‘Bring us around fast,’ he yelled. ‘Fire on all targets.’

Hrend struck the tank’s side plating with his right fist. The armour plates twisted. Pistons in his arm and legs rammed his weight forward, and heaved the side of the tank up. Its tracks churned. Dry dust and rubble fragments spun through the air. Its turret tried to turn, pointlessly, desperately. Hrend slammed his other fist up into the track. His hand clamped shut, and the drill teeth on the end of each finger spun to life. The tracks shattered, metal links churning out as the drive wheels kept turning. The tank began to skid away, its other tracks digging into the ground. He triggered the meltaguns in the palms of his fists. The tank’s armour glowed from red to white. Molten metal ran like spilled blood over Hrend’s fists. Then the melta-jets hit a fuel line and the top and side of the tank blew out and up, in a glowing wet spray. Hrend cut the melta weapons and stepped back. The tank crashed back down to the ground, turret pivoting around like a head on a broken neck. He stepped back, fire washing over him. The tank was still, flames roaring out of its split hull, soot spreading across its corpse.

The sky above turned to white brilliance. His sensors fizzed, his view dimming. He paused, twisting to look upwards as the sheet of light faded into glowing streaks. Gods of metal stood above him, their shapes shrouded by fog and fire light. Plough-fronted heads swayed beneath backs bent by weapons. They stepped forward as one, and within the fluid of his sarcophagus Hrend thought his remaining flesh trembled. The Titans fired again, and again the sky became a blank sheet and the ground a frozen tableau. The stilled tongues of fires licked the mangled corpses of tanks. The shapes of battle automata and Dreadnoughts strode, or fell, or burned. Tanks tumbled, or ground forward, the spray and dust of their track clouds frozen in the moment of vanishing. Overlapping explosions blossomed and blurred together. Flare shells burst high

above, scattering motes of blinding light. Smoke blended with the patches of remaining night. A shell or fuel cell detonated inside the wreck of the dead tank beside him. Shrapnel pinged against his body and limbs.

He felt nothing, not the ring of the sharp fragments against his iron skin, nor the gouges left as bright scars on his body, nor the heat of the burning tank. Iron without, iron within, cold, unyielding, unliving. His world was a gunsight view washed with data, his feeling the cold feedback from servos. He took a step and the pistons in his limbs responded.

Voices washed across the vox channels. He saw one of the Sicarans in his group slew around a wreck, turret turning, and its cannon thumping shells into the distance. Orun and Gortun were close to him though he could not see them. Threat runes began to bloom in his sight as the enemy's second wave hit the ruin of the first.

He began to run. Pistons shortened and rammed down. A Predator in streaked white broke from the bright fog. Two hunter missiles loosed from his shoulders even as the recognition formed in his mind, White Scars, 5th Brotherhood. The Predator's cannon twitched towards him. The missiles hit the turret collar, and ripped it from the hull in a blazing plume.

Hrend kept running into the embrace of destruction, and felt nothing.

'Why are you here?'

Argonis listened as his words drained into the silence of the throne room. Perturabo's black eyes glittered back at him from pits sunken into the primarch's skull. At the foot and sides of the throne the still shapes of Perturabo's Iron Circle automatons stood unmoving, shields held before them. Only Forrix stood at his lord's side, the only triarch or senior Iron Warrior present.

Behind Argonis Sota-Nul swayed, the black mesh of her robes rustling on the floor. He heard her tri-ocular lenses whir as they refocused. A step further back Prophesius was utterly still in his green silk shroud, his breath a low hiss from behind his eyeless iron mask.

Perturabo's silence extended. Argonis fought to maintain his gaze under the pressure of the Lord of Iron's presence. The primarch and his First Captain had changed from when Argonis had seen them last. Forrix seemed diminished, shrunken in presence, if not in size, the twinkle of malice in his eyes replaced by emptiness. Perturabo himself seemed both more, and less, than he had been. His flesh had thinned on his bones, and the light clung to recesses of his skull in a way that Argonis's eyes could not read. The Logos, the Lord of Iron's war armour, was lost beneath the pistons and struts of black iron and brushed plasteel. His head nested in a mass of cables and metal tubes. In places the primarch's skin seemed to have grown over the implants. Argonis noted the weapons bonded to the armour's arms in bulbous clumps.

‘I do not answer to you, emissary,’ said Perturabo at last, his voice a measured rasp of steel. Argonis did not flinch.

‘You answer to the Warmaster, and I am his emissary.’

‘And that is why my brother sent you here, to ask why I am here?’

Argonis heard the edge in the words. He inclined his head, half in deference, and half in acknowledgement.

‘You sit above a dead world, pouring the strength of your Legion into its belly. You call our allies to you and spend them in battles without end, or purpose. Your Warmaster wishes to know why?’

‘You speak so?’ said Forrix. He raised an armoured finger and pointed it at Argonis as though it were the barrel of a gun. ‘Our commitment to Horus is beyond question.’

‘Our lord, the lord who holds your fealty and oaths, speaks, and asks, as he pleases.’ Argonis looked up at the bronze and ruby eye which capped the black pole in his hand. ‘And here and now I am his voice.’

Forrix’s mouth opened, but Perturabo’s eyes twitched, and the First Captain fell silent.

‘I will be at my brother’s side when the gates of our father’s realm fall. I will break Terra’s defences at his command, and stand beside him when the false Imperium is cast to the flames. Nothing, and no one, can prevent that.’

‘That is not an answer.’

Perturabo turned his head slowly, his gaze settling on the dark at the edges of his throne room.

‘This world was a vital base during the Crusade. The alignment of warp routes that spread from it, and the capacity and resilience of its shelters mean that if it is not ours then it will be used by our enemies. There are many routes to the Throne World, emissary, each one guarded by worlds such as this. The end of this war will not be won just by strength, or numbers, but by who controls those Gates to Terra.’ The Lord of Iron paused and rotated his gaze back to Argonis. ‘This is one such gate, and I will deliver it to the Warmaster.’

‘The forces you have gathered–’

‘Are what is required.’

Argonis held the primarch’s stare, but felt the chill spread through him under that gaze. It was like being submerged in ice. It was like standing in the presence of Horus Lupercal. After a second he bowed his head low, taking care to ensure that the banner remained upright.

‘I will remain, lord,’ said Argonis, taking care that his tone held defence, respect, and strength. ‘And watch the conclusion of this… endeavour.’

Perturabo inclined his head a fraction.

‘As you wish.’

The doors to the throne chamber began to grind open at an invisible signal. Argonis straightened and walked from the room, the banner of the Warmaster held in his hand. Sota-Nul and Prophesius following in his wake. As soon as the doors began to grind shut behind him, he clamped his helm over his head. Sota-Nul's dry cog voice filled his ears as she spoke over the short-range vox. The signal was encrypted, and the tech-witch had sub-vocalised her words.

'You were not satisfied-convinced with the Fourth Primarch's answer-response.'

Argonis kept looking ahead, kept walking. Iron Warriors watched him pass, eyepieces coal-red in the low light. The sound of his footsteps seemed to echo as they walked down the wide passage.

'Send the signal,' he replied after a second. 'Let's see what Alpharius's asset knows.'

Iaeo's world narrowed in the instant it took her to hit the floor. The feeling of her body had vanished, the sensations of her flesh flattened to data sorted by her subconscious. Her kind were created as weapons, as murderers and executioners, but they did those deeds from a distance. They were not Eversor, or Calidus, or even Culexus. Vanus killed like gods, without ever having to hold the blade or touch the blood. The problem space of combat was uncomfortably small, the variables too fine and too easily misjudged. It was messy. It was inelegant. Wasteful. But occasionally necessary.

The blur-suited shapes were moving too fast to track. That did not matter. Reaction was not the way of the Vanus Temple. Prediction was everything.

The stink of ionising air was thick in her nose.

Data: Three weapons, energy-based, volkite 93 per cent likely. Cycle from charge to fire 0.03 seconds.

She came up from her roll.

Projection: Adversaries training and conditioning will mean that they anticipate target movement prior to firing.

She twisted and dropped flat to the floor, limbs splayed like a spider. Two red pulses of energy cut the air where she would have been.

Data: One adversary still to fire.

Her muscles bunched.

Projection: Shot held in case other two adversaries missed. Clever/competent/dangerous.

She leapt off the floor, with a single snap of muscle. The volkite beam struck the floor, and exploded a circle of rockcrete to dust. She twisted as she flew through the air. Her hands grabbed the edge of the still-open vent hatch.

Projection: Other exits from ventilation shafts compromised.

She yanked herself into the air duct.

Data: Corridor door, 20 metres away, currently sealed, only viable exit.

She could hear the soft, swift sounds of the figures in the corridor beneath her. Her hand had already slipped into a pouch and found the small, smooth sphere.

Projection: There is no way of escape while they live.

The grenade was of alien manufacture rather than human. Its surface was smooth, like ground bone, and it always seemed the same temperature as her skin when she touched it, never warmer, never cooler. Where it had come from was data that she had not been given. She knew only what it would do when it detonated. That knowledge was enough.

Iaeo dropped the grenade through the hatch, and she pulled her body into the vent space.

Data: 1 second since grenade release.

A beam vapourised the edge of the hatch. A blast of heat washed over her. The skin of her face charred and blistered.

Data: 2 seconds since grenade release.

The grenade detonated with a sound like countless needles scraping metal.

Data: Silence. Projection: Adversaries eliminated.

She snapped the visor back over her eyes, and blinked her way to the net-fly feeds from the corridors around her current position. Empty, or at least they seemed so. An increased error/subversion factor now had to be applied to all direct data inputs. The compressed awareness of combat was fading. The skin of her face was severely burned. Her hands were cut to the bone, and she was bleeding. She needed to move. A clock began to count in her consciousness.

Count: 2 seconds since enemy asset elimination.

She slid out of the damaged vent hatch, and hung beneath it for a heartbeat. The corridor space was red. A thick jelly of pulped flesh covered the walls and ceiling. Hard objects lay amongst the wetness. Her eyes found the grenade, its shape glossed with blood. The monofilament strands which had exploded from its surface had withdrawn beneath its eggshell casing. A flick of her eyes identified, dismissed, and then selected other objects from the flesh soup.

Count: 5 seconds

She swung down, and landed with a small splash. She picked up the grenade, then made two quick steps to pluck up a trio of what looked like implanted comms units. A calculated jump took her to the edge of the spreading pool of blood. She stripped to the overalls she had been wearing, and stepped from them without losing her stride. Beneath, she was a matt black statue from the neck down, the pouches bonded to the synskin breaking the outline of her muscles across her back.

Count: 11 seconds. Projection: 9 to 15 seconds until enemy aware of asset loss.

She began to run. This was going to be messy, but there was no other available path to take. She was under direct threat, and that meant that the possibility of total mission failure was very real.

Count: 13 seconds.

The sealed door from the corridor into the rest of the shelter was in front of her. The visor was projecting the scene from an expanding sphere of rooms and passages around her, as her net-flies repositioned to form a shell around her.

Count: 14 seconds.

The net-fly on the other side of the door caught movement as a figure stepped into the corridor beyond. She took in the field overalls of the Sectanal Regency Guard, the rank pins and status implants around the eyes: an officer, mid-grade, support echelon. She had no idea if he was what he seemed, and at that moment it was irrelevant. The corridor she stood in was filled with the liquidised remains of three Alpha Legion operatives, and there was only one way out. The projections indicated that survival was a low probability.

Count: 16 seconds.

She opened the door, rammed it wide, and burst through it at a run. The Regency Guard officer turned at the noise, his mouth opening. Her hand came up and the digi-needler on her third finger spat a sliver of crystallised toxin into the roof of his mouth. He began to fall. Released air sighed from between his teeth. If anyone but a very, very highly trained and suspicious specialist examined the dead officer, they would conclude that he had died from a sudden massive heart attack. She ran past his corpse.

Count: 19 seconds.

The other Alpha Legion operatives would likely clean up the remains of their dead comrades. They had no interest in alerting the loyalists that there was a silent war being fought in their midst. A corridor of blood would cause as many problems for them as it would for Iaeo. That at least was what the projections said. That was what should happen. That was the best outcome.

She needed to leave the Crescent Shelter complex. She needed to get out, link back into her sources of data, and find a weapon to take her enemies down.

Count: 23 seconds. Projection: enemy aware of asset loss, 78 per cent probability.

She ducked into a small room, and wrenched up a rusted grate set in its floor. A long dark space looked back at her.

She would see this execution completed. But now she needed to run.

Count: 26 seconds. Projection: enemy aware of asset loss, 99 per cent probability.

She let out a measured breath, and dropped into the waiting dark.

Forrix 'The Breaker', First Captain, triarch

The Sightless Warren held. In truth the loyalist attack failed to even penetrate its surface defences.

When dawn broke over the site of the loyalists' assault, its weak light touched fresh fields of dead war machines. Smoke stained the thinning fog soot-grey, and the flames of still-burning wrecks created pools of red light. When the fires had died the failed assault would be just another layer of devastation on a landscape of ruin. The Sapphire City had long ago ceased to exist in all but name. Its buildings had been broken by the Iron Warriors assault which had taken the shelter beneath. Attempts to crack open the Sightless Warren with orbital bombardment had reduced what remained to rubble, and before the failed attempts could reach the Sightless Warren only a few defiant ghosts of the city's past remained.

The corpse of a Warlord Titan stood slumped against a spire of girders and rubble from a building now a memory lost in crushed rock and shattered metal. The god-machine's head was a merged lump, its carapace cratered and rippled by heat. The fused crystal of its eyes looked out over the tidelines of battle marked by heaps of metal.

Along the one-time coastal plains the loyalist forces withdrew in a ragged herd. The Iron Warriors harried them, deploying fresh reserves to bleed their defeated enemies, and the loyalists fought to stop the withdrawal becoming a rout.

High above the plains the grand cruiser Memloch *held in low orbit. Flanked by the* Veratas *and* Son of the Red Star *it had beaten off three attempts by the Iron Warriors to bombard the retreating forces. It was its last action in the Battle of Tallarn. An hour before the last retreating units reached safety, the* Memloch *fell from the sky. Its hull pierced in dozens of places, it plunged into the sludge of Tallarn's northern ocean. Debris fountained into the already clogged atmosphere. Its reactor exploded and sent a shudder through the earth that was felt thousands of kilometres away. On another planet this alone would have been a catastrophe. On Tallarn few even noticed.*

THREE

Dreams of Order
Cracked
Unscarred

‘There has to be another reason,’ said Kord, taking the optics from his eyes, and massaging the bridge of his nose. ‘Stands to reason.’

He looked up at the face of Colonel Augustus Fask, and wished the man was not there. The other officer looked like he had been soaked and then hung out to dry. A damp sheen clung to Fask’s jowly face, and his Jurnian officer corps uniform looked like he had slept in it many times over and never washed it. But then there was little enough water in the shelter complex to drink, let alone ensure that uniforms were cleaned and pressed. Even if you were a command-level officer with strategic control, you wore the same uniform for months. After a while you just stopped noticing the smell.

Fask had turned up in Kord’s cramped billet, with a smile and a bottle of liquor, an hour after Kord had got through decontamination. The bottle was already a third empty, and Fask’s breath was rank with the smell of the spirit as he settled into the folding chair opposite Kord.

‘Terra, Silas, this is how you relax now?’ Fask’s eyes were skating over the maps laid out over the folding table next to Kord’s cot. Inked lines crossed the maps in different colours. Notes in neat, printed hand filled the spaces next to areas marked with circles. Kord wished he had been able to put them away before Fask had started reading them. ‘Everything all right?’ asked Fask, after a long pause. ‘I mean, you holding together?’

Kord shrugged. He was very, very tired. He did not want to sleep, but he did not want to talk to Augustus Fask either. They had ridden war machines together back on Jurn, and then on Iconis. They were both squadron commanders then, younger, and full of the more comfortable sort of lies that went with a soldier’s life. Kord supposed that history allowed Fask to think of him as a friend. Only problem was he did not like the man, never had. And Fask was not there to check he was all right, at least not in a friendly sense.

Kord stood and made to fold the maps up. Fask put his glass down on the maps as Kord reached for them. Some of the liquid slopped over the chipped rim of the glass, and began to pool on the parchment.

‘I mean it, Silas. Is everything all right?’

Kord took a step back, and controlled the stab of anger needling at the back of his eyes. He reached into a pocket in his fatigues and found a lho-stick. He turned away as he lit the stick.

‘I wound up sitting on my hands on a backwater world while the rest of creation tore itself apart.’ He sat down on the folding chair, and breathed out a slow, smoke-heavy breath. ‘That planet gets virus bombed. The Iron Warriors decide to turn the sludge that’s left into a battleground. Then our side decide to get in the fight. I get my command all but wiped out, in what was, until last night, our biggest defeat. And we are still rolling around trying to break an enemy that has made its reputation out of being unbreakable.’ He paused, nodded to himself as if satisfied. ‘And we have no idea why they are here, or why it started. So yeah, everything is all right.’

Fask sat down on Kord’s bunk, his glass back in his hand.

‘Don’t need to know answers to fight,’ said Fask, and took a gulp.

‘No,’ Kord nodded, ‘but it might help if we want to win.’

Fask shook his head, picked up the bottle, and began to pour himself a fresh measure. After a second he snorted and raised the bottle to Kord. The oily liquid splashed against the bottle sides.

Kord shook his head. Fask grunted.

‘You really are as twisted around as they say.’ Fask put the bottle down. He wrapped both hands around his refilled glass, but did not raise it to his mouth. All pretence of humour had gone from his face. ‘Central command’s worried about you.’

‘Thought it might be something like that,’ nodded Kord carefully.

‘Look, it’s just the way it is. This theory of yours worries them.’

‘Worries them?’ Kord raised an eyebrow. ‘How?’

‘All this stuff about why the enemy are here, about there having to be *another reason*. You keep it to yourself, sure, but people talk, and in this place…’ Fask gestured at the cot, table and chair pressed between bare rockcrete walls and the metal slab of the door. ‘People hear, people talk.’

‘That why they sent you, to stop me thinking about it?’ Kord looked at the floor so that Fask would not see the anger he could feel boring out of his eyes. ‘You know where I have been? Eighteen hours in a machine, six going out, six in direct engagement, six coming back while the Iron Warriors try and turn our loss into a victory slaughter.’ He stopped and nodded, his face set into a frown as though considering deeply. ‘Good timing.’

Fask was shaking his head, impatience seeping from him as he sighed.

‘You know, this was meant to just be a friendly talk.’

Kord nodded and tried to make his face reasonable, moderate. Calm.

‘When did you last ride a machine, Fask?’ he asked, softly. ‘On the surface. You know, that place up there with the dead people, and the gunfire.’

‘Throne, Silas.’ Fask stood, stepped to the door and yanked it open. ‘You know what, do what you like. I look forward to reading the discipline report.’

After a second Kord got up, closed the door and sat down at the table. Carefully he dabbed at the pool of spirit which had blurred the ink of the map. He stared at the lines, circles and notes again. It was incomplete, there was only so much information on engagements with the Iron Warriors and their allies that he could get hold of, but even so it meant something.

‘Searching,’ he said to himself.

Carefully he reached under his cot, and pulled a bottle out. The liquid inside was honey gold, and clung to the bottle sides as he unscrewed the top and took a swig. He inhaled sharply. Then took another gulp. He nodded again to himself.

‘Searching.’

They took Hrend back to the silence of sleep. He had walked from the field of battle as the fog had begun to lighten with the coming of dawn. Far below the earth, in the caverns of the Sightless Warrens the adepts and Techmarines had begun to pull his machine body apart. He wondered if others of his kind thought of it as a relief. That had been how some of the tech-priests had talked of it when he had been amongst the living: a release from the pain of an existence snatched from death, a return to the peace of oblivion. Hrend did not think of it that way.

They took his power to move first, shutting down his neural connections to the Dreadnought frame so that the impulse which would have moved an arm, or lifted a leg, now did nothing. Ghosts of his old limbs returned to him: the feeling of his left arm twitching, the fingers itching even though they were no longer there. They took sight and sound after that. Silent blackness enclosed him with the suddenness of a disconnected plug. Those were the moments that were the worst. In the silence, he could imagine himself as nothing, just a tangle of stray thoughts and ghost sensations held in a box. What was worse was that in those moments he thought he should be angry, but instead he felt empty. And then, at last, they would drown his thoughts with sedatives, and give him to his dreams.

The dreams were his home now. Sometimes he went back to Isstvan and burned again. Sometimes he felt pain. Sometimes he forgot that it was a dream, and thought that he was dying again. When it ended he would try and remember the feeling of moving, of breathing, of being alive. He dreamed of the past. He dreamed of how he had become an Iron Warrior. He tasted the blood in his mouth again, and felt the razors filleting skin and muscle from his bones. The pain was a sea of ice and burning acid. There was no relief; to endure was to become stronger. He had looked up into the Apothecary’s metal mask, and seen his own reflection in the circular lenses. His heart had beat in the open cavity of his chest.

‘What do you wish?’ the Apothecary had asked, the ritual words rising over the sounds of the bone saw.

‘To be… Iron,’ he had gasped through his own blood.

They had given him his wish.

He dreamed of the fields of a thousand battles, the ground chewed by shellfire, the flesh of the dead pulped into the mud. He saw faces he had never realised he would remember. He saw his life jumbled into chunks of colour and sound and smell, and they were more real than waking.

He had died on Isstvan V. His flesh had boiled in his armour. They had clamped his dying flesh at the heart of a body of pistons, plasteel and servos. They had woken him for the first time, and told him that he would serve the Legion still. They had given him a new name, one cut from his old name, like a word formed by mutilation. He had become Iron for a second time.

He remembered all this, and lived it again, screaming mutely as the unsettled tides of sleep came up to meet him. He struggled for an instant then fell…

And fell…

The true world snapped back into being, sharp and unforgiving. He felt his nerves mesh with the machine again, felt the silence form around him.

He was waking again, his fall into oblivion halted.

A voice came to him out of the dark, crackling with static.

‘*You rise again, Ironclad. The primarch has called you to him.*’

‘The Fourth Primarch’s words were false-incomplete in truth-value,’

Argonis did not bother to open his eyes to look at Sota-Nul. The servitors were peeling his armour from him, piece by piece, muttering in their machine voices as they moved around him. They did not like being near Sota-Nul, he could tell. They moved like curbed animals whenever she came close. He could not say he blamed them; he did not like being near her either.

The room was large, its floor polished rockcrete, its walls brushed metal, and the light came from globes floating in bronze cages. Red fabric softened the hard lines of the walls, and hung over the straight-backed chairs. Statuary – a rare thing to see in the presence of the Iron Warriors – stood in the room’s recesses, the features of each sculpture bluntly stylised. The chamber was amongst the more luxurious living quarters he had seen aboard a IV Legion ship. The point was not lost on Argonis; he was honoured, but he was different, softer, not of the Iron.

Argonis felt the cool air of the chamber touch his skin as the servitors released the plating from his torso. The armour was sea-green and black. Cthonian kill glyphs spidered across the plates in beaten gold wire. A burnished crest of wings spread across the chestplate, and enamelled laurels ringed the brows of his helm.

A bolt pistol and gladius hung at his waist, the grips of both decorated by mirror coins.

Black tattoos of wings and the geometric lines of Cthonian gang glyphs ran across the muscle beneath his armour shell. To anyone who had been born in the warrens of Cthonia, his skin would have shouted his past, from the kills he had made in his youth, to the honours he had won as a warrior of the XVI Legion. A killer, they would have read: nightwalker, oath taker, and one who has won loyalty through blood. Crescent wings spread across his neck and shoulders, a full moon set between their feathers. That last symbol told that he was Chieftain of the Isidis Flight, the pilot cadre oath bound to the First Company elite. Pale scars crossed the flesh of his arms, back and chest, the hair-fine lines hatching his skin. The Unscarred they called him, half in reference to the fact that his face was untouched by war, and partly in ironic reference to the years of knife bouts which had left their razor marks on his body. He flexed his shoulders and the inked feathers rippled.

‘Do you not concur with my truth-analysis?’ Sota-Nul asked, and a prickling of his skin told him that she was looking directly at him. ‘Perturabo lied about his war.’

‘A primarch’s reasons and motivations are their own,’ he said. ‘They are beyond truth and falsity.’

‘I have shut the ears of all who would listen to us. We can speak openly.’

‘I was. Perturabo speaks the truth, in part at least. Tallarn is important, or could be, and he has never failed to answer the Warmaster’s bidding before.’

‘That view does not match your actions. You have summoned the operative. Why, if all is as it seems?’

The last plates of his armour came away and he felt the fabric of a tabard slip over his neck. Sota-Nul was looking at him. The cluster of nine lenses on the left side of her dead flesh face glowed green in the low light.

‘Nothing is as it seems,’ he said carefully.

A sudden scratching made both turn. Prophesius was moving, each step a sinuous transition between instances of complete stillness. A blank mask covered his head in its entirety, the metal scored with symbols which Argonis did not understand and did not like to look at. A lock-like mechanism held the mask shut at the back of the head. The key from that mechanism hung around Argonis’s neck, its presence a promise he wondered if he would have to keep.

Hands had appeared from beneath Prophesius’s green silk robes. The fingers on each were withered and twisted as though they had been broken and healed before they were set. His right hand clutched a tablet of wax set in a silver frame. A long metal spike capped the index finger of his left. After a pause he stabbed

the spike down into the wax. His head was lolling back, his hands moving as though pulled by wires.

he is marked

The gouged letters showed clear on the pale wax. Prophesius paused, once again utterly still.

Argonis stared at the astropath, and then at the words on the tablet. He had no idea what they might mean. Blood was oozing from the edge of Prophesius's nails, running down onto the wax tablet.

'You refer to the primarch, to Perturabo?'

Prophesius's hand jerked to life again, slashing words into the wax.

the eye has seen him he has passed through it has seen him he has seen

Argonis opened his mouth, a question forming on his tongue.

Sota-Nul flinched, as though woken from sleep by a sudden noise. Argonis turned to her.

'Return signal from Alpharius's asset received…' she began.

'I thought this area was shrouded,' he growled.

'Signal confirms contact,' she continued, shaking her head as though struggling to hear. Then she looked up at Argonis, the light in her nine-fold eyes hard and bright. 'He will come to us.'

She passed the time by breaking the Alpha Legion communication ciphers.

It had been sixteen hours since Iaeo had folded herself into the crawl space, and she estimated that it would be another eight until she moved. Stillness was the key to invisibility. That truth was one of the first lessons taught in the Assassin Temples on Terra. Another strategy might have been to move continually, to make herself impossible to pin down. That strategy had merits, but most of them applied when you had somewhere to go. At present she had no location to reach, and getting out of the Crescent Shelter would be difficult, bordering on impossible. Not actually impossible, of course, but that was the way it might seem based on probabilities of detection/death. She was hunted, and she needed to stay alive if she was going to complete her mission.

So she had scrambled down into the deep reaches of the shelter, where the tunnels were choked with cables and pipes, and the dust and grime told its own story of how many had made the journey before her. The feeds from the cordon of net-flies were showing nothing concerning. Air temperature, sound levels and vibration were all steady at background levels. The multifaceted eye of the swarm showed her nothing other than empty shafts, ducts and tunnels. Everything was quiet. There, folded into a space small enough that even a child would struggle to reach her, she waited, and ran codes through her partitioned mind.

She needed to watch the swarm of net-flies – which currently watched every connection to her current location – but that only took half of her awareness.

Cracking the Alpha Legion's comms had seemed a good use of the rest of her mind.

It had taken her a few awkward minutes to activate and expose the workings of the comms implants she had taken from the dead operatives. Two of her flies had bitten into the blood-slicked machine, and encrypted communications had begun to flood her awareness. The data was most likely low level, nothing big, nothing of critical importance, but she existed to make lethal situations from tiny fragments. Besides, cracking the ciphers gave her something to do.

The Mechanicum of Mars now claimed the realm of technology and its mysteries as theirs and theirs alone, but the traditions and mysteries which would become the Assassin Temples had been born in Old Night, and they had secrets of their own. The Red Priests might claim dominion over the machine, logic and calculation, but Vanus were not machines, they were the powers of human reason refined to a sharp point. And they lived for information. It was not just a skill, or training, or even the modifications made to their brains by razor, gene graft and alchemistry. It was a compulsion, a drive burned into her that she had to satisfy. There were sacred logic engines on Mars which could have cracked the ciphers, machines which would have creaked and wailed to the same solution, but they lacked the human component that the Vanus so treasured. They lacked obsession.

The cipher was complex, even for covert communications. She enjoyed knowing that, it made watching it fall apart more satisfying. It took her five hours. When she cracked it at last she allowed herself a few moments for the data to wash around her senses. It felt like light, like fresh water, and warm air. The comms unit was not picking up transmissions any more, but fragments of what had passed through it still remained, scattered like shards of a shattered window. She dipped her mind into them, noting, collating and archiving. There was some valub–

Her mind stopped dead. Then her heart began to hammer. Blood flushed into her brain, as lines of deduction and possibility began to form, combine and expand. She had to move, she had to get out of the shelter no matter how.

She began to squeeze back out of her bolthole. Once able to crawl she began to move faster. Once she could run and climb, she was a blur of black synskin rising through the depths of the shelter. The lines of computation in her mind spun on, hungering for more data, promising conclusions. At the core of each accelerating thought the single fragment of Alpha Legion signal echoed and glowed, like a message written in fire.

…THE EMISSARY HAS ARRIVED…

War never ceased on Tallarn. In the face of victory and defeat, it ground on without pause.

In the six hours after the retreat of the Third Assault of the Sightless Warren, a force of four hundred war machines set off from the Cobalack Shelter. Supposedly they were to link up with loyalist elements which had fled north after the attack, though no one would later be able to recall who had given the order. No trace of them was ever found.

In the void, the ragged fleet carrying the Legio Krytos and the survivors of House Caesarean dropped from the warp, cutting its way through loyalist ships to drop its forces onto Tallarn's southern pole. From above, the ships of both sides watched as the clouds above the southern landmass danced with flames as they, the traitor Titans and Knights, matched themselves against the maniples of the Legio Gryphonicus.

In the Cassildian Mountains the loyalist bunker complex fell when decontamination measures failed. The complex's last signal echoed across the planet's electro-sphere for hours after the last of its inhabitants had died.

In the command rooms of the loyalist shelters, and in the strategiums of the vessels circling in the void, the fractures in command split wide. Colonels, captains, praetors, generals, and others of countless vaunted ranks began to blame, insult, ignore and rebuke each other for a failure which all of them had had a hand in creating. It was Dellasarius, Governor Militant of Tallarn before its murder, and in name still commander of all forces on its surface, who silenced the squall of voices.

'We will attack again,' he said. 'We attack again, and again, until there are no more of us who can. And then we find a way to do it again until we break them.' Then, into the uneasy silence which followed, he added. 'Remember where this is, and the price we have paid to reach this day. This is not just war, this is vengeance.'

FOUR

Quiet
Father
Lies

‘Did you see that, War Anvil*?’*

‘This is *War Anvil*. What are you seeing, *Razor*?’

‘Movement to the south. Visual only, nothing on the auspex. Might just be the wind.’

Kord shifted the view on the cracked auspex screen. Nothing. They were ten hours out from the Crescent Shelter, running across the Tesilon Flats in a pair of staggered lines. There were twenty machines in his command, barely a company strength from the regiment as it had been. The battle tanks, a mix of Vanquishers and Executioners, rode in a box formation with *War Anvil* at their centre. The scouts were further out, running fast before going still to watch. Nothing usually came across the flats, not from either side, but caution was what kept you alive on Tallarn.

Kord keyed the vox again.

‘You get a sense of what direction it was going?’ The static swallowed his words. Origo’s voice came back a second later.

‘South-east, but that’s just a feeling.’

‘Strength?’

‘Hard to say,’ replied Origo. *‘If it was real, more than one, less than a hundred.’*

‘Just a patrol sweep,’ said Zade, across the local vox. The gunner had been listening in.

‘Could be one of ours,’ Sacha added.

‘Could be…’ Zade’s voice shrugged for him, without Kord needing to see him.

‘They don’t normally come through this way,’ said Kord softly. ‘Too far out, no targets.’ *This could be it*, he thought, *one of the strange Iron Warriors patrols he had been mapping for the last months*. His mind was ticking through the possibility of taking his machines to investigate the sighting. The least efficient machines in the group had air and fuel to last another sixteen hours of straight running, more if they stripped back the power taken by the tactical system. Command would not like it. No, command would hit the roof. He thought of

Fask's blotched face and the stain from his drink leeching from the lines and notes he had made on the maps.

'*Sir,*' Origo's voice hissed in his ears again. '*If we leave it much longer we might not be able to acquire them again. What do you want to do?*'

Kord stared at the key of the vox for a second, and then nodded to himself.

'All units, this is *War Anvil*, hold formation on my position, heading south-east. Weapons cold, we have enemy in sight, so stay quiet.'

His father came to him in the cavern beneath the earth. Hrend knelt as the Lord of Iron entered the chamber. The shield-bearing automatons of the Iron Circle formed a wall around them, facing outwards. The cavern had once been a muster area of a shelter which was now part of the Sightless Warren. The Mechanicum had filled the space with the devices of their art. The dark reaches of the cavern growled and sparked with the pulse of great machines. Here Hrend, and his Dreadnought brothers, slept and waited to be called to battle. All the tech-priests and adepts had left before Perturabo arrived, so that Hrend and his primarch were alone in a circle of cold light.

'Lord.' Hrend's voice rumbled from his speakers. Perturabo stood in silence for a long moment, his metal-wrapped body seeming to breathe with him.

'You were Sollos Hrendor,' said Perturabo. 'Master of the Seven Hundred and First Armoured Cohort.'

'That was who I was, my master.' Hrend felt his ghost limbs twitch.

'I have need of you,' said Perturabo, and his armour seemed to buzz in time with the words.

'I obey.'

The Lord of Iron paused again. In the silence Hrend heard his master's armour creak, like dry bones. When he spoke again, his voice rolled through the air, as deep and dangerous as an ocean.

'No, Sollos. No, this time I will not command you. Rise.'

Hrend stood, extending to his full height with a hiss of oiled metal. Perturabo stood shorter than Hrend, though somehow seemed to be greater. The primarch's exo-augmentation gleamed with oily reflections. Armour plates layered the frame, the machinery below visible through the gaps where the plates parted and overlapped. The primarch had changed since Hrend had last seen him. But then hadn't they all? They had gone beyond reality and returned. They had been betrayed and offered up to otherworldly powers. Who could not be changed by that?

'It is not enough for you to obey,' said Perturabo. 'You must know what I ask you to do, and why. You must believe.'

The servos in Hrend's head unit hissed as they tried to interpret the signal to bow his head.

‘How may I serve?’

Argonis stepped into the light of the hangar bay. Sota-Nul and Prophesius followed a step behind him, one gliding as though on polished ice, the other shuffling. His Storm Eagle sat in a pool of stab-lights. Her name was *Sickle Blade*, and her black and sea-green fuselage made her seem an interloper amongst the brushed iron skins of the Iron Warriors craft. Servitors moved over her. Thick trunks of fuel lines snaked away from her belly into the deck. Human serfs in tan overalls and blank faceplates moved amongst the servitors, performing rote maintenance too complicated for the half-machines. An enginseer in layered red robes stood to the side, utterly still apart from the light of scrolling data glowing in the darkness of its hood. A false wind blew through the hangar bay, stirred by the engines of the larger gunships. Parchment tapers fluttered from the catches on *Sickle Blade*’s open inspection plates.

‘Master.’ A serf, wearing a breath mask and with a senior rank code tattooed across his scalp, knelt at Argonis’s approach. Argonis did not pause or reply. His eyes were roaming over the gunship, noting the care the Iron Warriors had taken over readying the machine.

Twelve days had passed since they had received the initial signal from the Alpha Legion operative, twelve days in which they had heard nothing more. Argonis had begun to wonder if the asset was real, or just another part of the Alpha Legion’s endless misdirection. That, or perhaps the asset could not reach them. Having an asset embedded in Perturabo’s forces was one thing, getting a clear, open channel signal onto his flagship without him noticing was another. Yet the assets had picked up Sota-Nul’s contact signal, and acknowledged in turn, which meant that they had the means to bypass the Iron Warriors countermeasures.

‘Master,’ the serf spoke again. He was trailing just behind Argonis’s head and shoulders bent, eyes pointing down. ‘I am commanded to tell you that your craft is still being made ready for launch.’

Argonis did not reply. The serf bobbed his head and hurried to keep pace. The human’s words were unnecessary; Argonis could see that both the *Sickle Blade* and its escort were still several minutes from launch readiness. Once they were ready, the descent to Tallarn would begin. For such a simple flight the tactical planning had been extensive. The *Iron Blood* would move closer to the planet, as a sub-fleet performed an attack run against the enemy forces in orbit. Argonis and his escort would drop to the surface above a deserted area to one of the Sightless Warren’s landing fortresses. There was a certain risk to the operation, but nothing substantial. On one level that disappointed Argonis.

The last minutes before a launch were amongst the few pleasures he allowed himself now. The smell of fuel and oil, the sound of engines test-firing, the itch of

passive anti-grav flickering across his skin. He let it all wash over and through him, sharpening him. It reminded him of the knife fights he had fought before he had become a legionary, the moments just before everything became the flicker of razors, the moment when he felt a knot of doubt in his heart: would he live or was he about to walk down a tunnel that had no end?

He came around the rear of the *Sickle Blade* and ducked into the open assault hatch. The space within was dark, lit only by the light from the hangar and the glow of instrument panels set into the walls. He stepped inside, eyes checking the position and readiness of every detail. Prophesius and Sota-Nul followed. The sound of a third set of feet on the assault ramp made his head turn. The serf was still following them, head still bowed in respect. Argonis opened his mouth, but the serf was already moving, all semblance of respect gone.

The bolt pistol was free from his thigh and rising as Sota-Nul began to turn. The serf was already at the door controls and the hatch was closing. Argonis's finger closed on the bolt pistol's trigger. It froze. Frost was spreading from his trigger finger up his arm. Beside him Prophesius was twitching, masked head shaking.

'That would be a mistake,' said the serf as he turned to face Argonis. Beads of sweat formed on the man's forehead, catching the light as they ran down to the rim of his breath mask. 'Please relax your trigger finger. I can stop you shooting for a few more moments, but with your masked associate so close it is taking a lot of effort.'

Sota-Nul hissed. Argonis noticed that an array of exotic weapons on metal tentacles had sprouted from beneath her robes, each one poised like a dozen scorpion stings. Prophesius was still twitching and shaking. The air had become heavy and thick.

'You are?' he asked, though he felt he knew the answer.

'A gift from Lord Alpharius,' said the man. Argonis nodded, relaxed the tension in his trigger finger, but did not lower the pistol. 'My thanks,' said the man, reaching up to unfasten the breath mask covering his lean and hairless face. Green eyes looked up at Argonis without fear. 'Greetings, Argonis. I offer apologies for the manner of my arrival. This is one of the few places in which it is at least moderately safe for us to meet. I would have organised our meeting sooner, but care had to be taken. You understand.'

'The proof of who you are,' said Argonis, the barrel of his weapon still level with the man's forehead.

A smile twitched on the man's lips, but the eyes stayed cold and steady.

Reptile eyes, thought Argonis.

'Of course.' Patterns began to spiral across the man's face. The rank code on his forehead vanished, swallowed by green scales and blue feathers. The patterns

grew thicker, until the man's exposed skin was a tangle of crawling serpents and spread birds' wings. He blinked, and the patterns slid down onto his eyelids. Carefully, he pulled a heavy glove from his left hand. A simple symbol glowed on the centre of the palm: two lines joined to make an open-bottomed triangle. The alpha, the mark of the XX Legion.

'My name is Jalen,' said the tattooed man. He let his hand drop. Two heartbeats later Argonis lowered his gun. He glanced at Sota-Nul, but the tech-witch's weapons had already vanished beneath her robes. 'How may I serve the Warmaster's emissary?'

'Why are the Iron Warriors here?'

Jalen blinked slowly, nodded.

'We do not know.'

'You–'

'There is a reason they are here, of that we are certain, and it is not the reason that they have given you. Most of their own warriors do not know the truth, because they have been told a lie. The same lie told to you. It is a good lie, and like all lies it has been grown from a seed of truth. But it is not truth.'

'Your breed would know.'

Jalen smiled, white teeth bright in a tangle of colour.

'Yes, we would.'

'Why are you present-here?' asked Sota-Nul. Jalen glanced at her, raised an eyebrow, and the pattern of scales around his eyes rippled. The tech-witch's eye lenses pulsed as if in imitation. 'Your Legion-warriors are fighting on Tallarn,' she continued. 'If you do not know why the Fourth Legion are present-engaged, then your Legion must have its own reason.'

'We were here before they came.' Jalen shook his head. 'You think that all the worlds that declare for the Warmaster without a fight do so willingly? Tallarn's use to the Great Crusade had passed, but in this war it could have been useful again. We were… realigning its loyalties.'

'And now?' asked Argonis. 'What are you doing now?'

'Making the best of the situation.'

Argonis watched Jalen carefully. Every instinct bred and trained into him was screaming that he should turn the operative's skull into blood mist, or drag a bloody smile across his throat. Jalen's eyes twitched, as though in response to the thought. Argonis remembered the force holding his trigger finger still, and answered Jalen's smile with one of his own.

'You know that they lie,' Sota-Nul's voice buzzed into the silence, 'but you have not found what it masks-hides.'

'Not for lack of trying, I can assure you,' replied Jalen. He glanced at Argonis. 'Since the Iron Warriors have arrived we have done nothing but try and discover

why they are fighting this battle.’

‘And tried to bring about a swift victory for our forces, no doubt,’ said Argonis.

‘We have made a contribution, but there are wider concerns at play.’ Jalen cocked his head, his eyes fixed on Argonis. ‘Otherwise you wouldn’t be here, emissary. Otherwise you would not have summoned me. Otherwise the Warmaster would not be considering ordering Perturabo to abandon this fight. Is that not right?’

A sudden shudder rolled through the gunship’s hull. Argonis recognised the metallic thump of fuel lines disengaging. They were almost ready to launch. A low rumble filled the gloom as distant machines began to hoist other craft into launch rigs.

Jalen turned away and made for the hatch controls, his hands fastening the breath mask back in place.

‘I cannot give you the answer you want, emissary,’ he said. ‘But I can tell you that you travel in the right direction.’ He keyed the hatch and it folded down. The light of the hangar bay beyond pulsed with amber alert lights. Jalen stepped onto the ramp and looked back, his tattooed face a painted mask. ‘Whatever keeps the Iron Warriors here, it is down there, on Tallarn.’ Argonis held his gaze for a second, and then Jalen stepped down the ramp, and the tattooed patterns drained from his pale skin.

‘How do you wish us to proceed-continue?’ asked Sota-Nul. Argonis did not look at her. He realised that he still had his bolt pistol drawn, his finger still on the trigger.

‘We go down to the dead world,’ he replied.

The girl died quietly, her neck broken and her dead weight caught before it hit the floor. Iaeo was already pulling the corpse into the maintenance niche before the last air had sighed from the girl’s lungs.

Pict images from her net-flies winked at the corner of her sight. A group of three tank crew in overalls turned into the passage, talking in low voices and exhausted glances. She watched them pass the shadowed niche. Once they were past, she began to work fast.

The dead girl’s uniform fitted Iaeo to a reasonable approximation. She pulled it on, feeling the rubberised seal squeeze over her head, noting with a detached interest that it was still warm from body heat. She had studied the girl’s face for hours through the eyes of her net-flies, but she glanced at it again, trying to make sure that her facial features were a rough estimation of the leaden exhaustion written over the dead face. She hoped the uniform would be enough. If someone looked closely they might notice that it did not fit her properly. A guess of size and body shape was all she had been able to manage in the time she had. Even

then finding the correct moment to remove the girl had been uncomfortably open to error. She was no Calidus.

Data: 605 seconds to patrol muster. 907 seconds to terminal projection deadline.

She stood and moved into the passage. Behind her the corpse lay hidden in shadow. It would be found, but by that time she would be beyond reach.

She began to walk faster, hurrying towards the blast doors to the muster cavern. The enviro-suit hood swung from her hand.

Messy. Imprecise. She did not like this, not at all.

Behind her the four net-flies watching the passage buzzed after her. They landed on her shoulders and crawled into her hair. The rest were already dormant, their silver bodies gripping her synskin inside the enviro-suit, like hatchlings clinging to a mother queen.

Getting out of the shelter had not been a difficult problem, but it had not been easy either. Getting into a vehicle was a low-grade sub-problem. Getting into a vehicle that she could take control of quickly was another factor, but not a significant one. The number of other machines accompanying a potential machine was more important too many others and she would not be able to break away from them. That shrank the field of selection to a few. Then there was the matter of time. It was a strong assumption that the Alpha Legion might be drawing their snare tighter. The more time she spent in the Crescent Shelter the smaller that snare became. On the other side of the calculation was the fact that she was working quickly, and errors clung to haste like maggots to a corpse. Go too fast, take too many shortcuts and her plan would fail.

The time at which all the risk factors became overwhelming was her terminal projection deadline, and it had drawn closer with every second after she had killed the girl.

Data: 581 seconds to patrol muster. 883 seconds to terminal projection deadline.

She walked into the muster cavern. Rows of vehicles stretched away under the stark light of lumen-strips and stab-lights. The corrosive toxins saturating Tallarn's air had pulled the colour from their war paint. Exhaust fumes stained the ceiling, and the smell of oil was thick. The air chimed with the sound of metal: metal cases rattling as belts of ammunition snaked into hoppers, tracks clanking over rockcrete, hatches hinging open and closed.

She took it all in with a glance, and extrapolated to a 99 per cent accurate estimation of machines and personnel in the chamber.

675 war machines, 356 operational, 100 in need of fuel/service/rearming, 170 in need of repair, 49 likely to be scrapped and broken for parts, 980 humans, 680 servitors, 64 tech-priests. 23 per cent were tank crew either coming off mission or

preparing to go out. Level of activity consistent with standard levels of operation post arrival of…

‘What machine are you on?’ She looked around, blinking fast. A man in a green and grey uniform was looking down at her.

Data: Rank pins – Lieutenant, Fenellion Free Guard, Logistics Rated.

She realised that she had not replied and began to open her mouth.

‘You going out?’ he asked. ‘What machine?’

‘Vanquisher 681, Saraga Armoured Continuity Force Lionus, Fifth Subdivision, Gamma Squadron.’ She took a breath, then thought, and added, ‘Sir.’

The lieutenant let out a sigh, bloodshot eyes focusing under a frown.

Data: Eyes and breath odour indicate spur addiction.

Projection: 78 per cent probability of chronic insomnia, 56 per cent probability reduced fine motor function and sensitivity in extremities, 34 per cent probability of ni–

‘You floating on something?’ he said.

Iaeo froze for a second. She had a deep compulsion to look around her. She felt blind, her awareness confined to the data coming from her base five senses. There could be eyes watching her, feet moving closer, hands reaching for weapons. She ran her tongue over her lips, eyes darting over the lieutenant’s face.

‘You know…’ she began, ‘gotta… stay on top of it somehow.’

She had once heard a soldier say those words, and then watched him consume a large volume of alcohol. It had seemed to be a form of explanation.

The lieutenant stared at her. She hoped that the correct/expected facial expression was on her face. After a second he nodded.

‘Down that way, second row over.’

‘Thanks,’ she said, but he was already moving away. She had to hold back the instinct to run. Instead she moved as she thought people would move in a hurry. She saw the machines she wanted within a second. She had looked them over remotely, and reviewed each detail of their specifications. They were as familiar to her as her own hand. Except, of course, she had never been inside a tank.

Heads turned to look at her as she hurried closer. She scanned the faces, found one whose cardinal facial points corresponded to the squadron commander she was looking for, and saluted.

The woman’s face was flat, and seemed to be sheened in a mix of sweat and bearing grease. The black hair framing her face was clumped and matted.

Data: Lieutenant Casandra Menard, two years’ service in Saraga Armoured Continuity Force Lionus. Fought in the battle of–

Iaeo cut the data recall from her awareness. This was a crucial moment, and she needed to get the interaction right. Useful though the data she had sucked

from the shelter's regimental records might be, right here and now it was utterly irrelevant.

'What do you want?' the lieutenant asked, barely looking up at Iaeo.

'Gunner Vorina reporting for duty.'

'I don't need a gunner.'

Iaeo spoke the next words carefully. She had constructed them from a patchwork of observed and recorded interactions between officers and tank crews. She had practised the cadence, intonation and studied weariness in the words one thousand seven hundred and eleven times. She was still wondering if that was enough.

'Regiment sent me over.'

'All right.' The lieutenant nodded as though Iaeo had a point. 'But I still don't need a gunner.'

'They said that I was for tank 681. Something about the gunner for that one being out, and you needing someone in the slot for a surface run.'

'Huh. Cali's out? What happened?' Iaeo was about to answer when the lieutenant waved her hand. 'Never mind, probably fell over her own boots.' She jerked a thumb back over her shoulder at a Vanquisher with a long gouge across its front armour. 'That's 681. Commander's called Fule. Get comfortable quick. We are rolling out in three minutes.'

Data: 243 seconds to terminal projection deadline.

Iaeo stood for a second, her mouth ready to give a reply that now did not fit the pattern of conversation.

She had selected the squadron, tank and crew member she would replace with all the care she could afford. She had falsified a medical record that would confirm that the gunner of Vanquisher 681, Saraga Armoured Continuity Force Lionus, Fifth Subdivision, Gamma Squadron, had fallen and broken three bones in her arm. She had constructed a functional – if imperfect – ghost identity for herself, and implanted orders into the command chain which replaced the now absent gunner from Vanquisher 681 with her ghost identity. All of it balanced so that no one would spot the inconsistencies and contradictions, unless they were looking very closely. It was not the most delicate web she had ever created, but under the constraints it was still functional.

'Need something else?' asked the lieutenant as Iaeo continued to blink.

'Err… No.'

'Good. Then get moving.'

Iaeo nodded, and jogged over to the Vanquisher. Crew were already dropping the hatches on nearby tanks. Engines gunned and breathed hot exhaust into the air. She reached the Vanquisher, swung up, and dropped through the turret hatch. The metal hull was already vibrating to a rising pitch.

Data: 61 seconds to terminal projection deadline.

She pulled the hood of the dead gunner's enviro-suit over her head, plugged her breathe-line into the Vanquisher's air supply, and pulled the hatch closed above her.

Projection: Probability of exodus from Crescent Shelter 88 per cent.

The battle for Tallarn was a matter of numbers: numbers of ships, numbers of war machines, numbers of war machines damaged, numbers of war machines lost, numbers of crews, numbers of officers to lead crews, numbers of reserves to make more crews, numbers of stores, numbers of shells, numbers of bullets. The simple truth, believed by both sides, was that they were involved in a battle that would be decided by who had most, and who would run out soonest.

In the strategiums of the Sightless Warren the Iron Warriors calculated their active and potential strength ceaselessly. This was war as they had mastered it, the application of force and logistics until the enemy broke. Since they had come to Tallarn the numbers had changed drastically. They had begun with the overwhelming strength, and then seen that eroded by the flea bites of the resistance. They had pulled in more strength. Then the first forces loyal to the Emperor had arrived, and the advantage had shifted from overwhelming to simply significant. More had come to both sides, and losses for all had risen and risen. Which side possessed the numerical advantage had become far from clear.

A new set of numbers became significant: the number of units each side had active on the surface. One side might have more war machines, or greater capacity to sustain, or recover from damage, but if the other side could outnumber and overwhelm them for a short time the reserves and stores would not matter. Governor Militant Dellasarius called it 'the depth of cutting edge', and by the time of the Third Assault on the Sightless Warren, it was the guiding principle of the loyalist strategy. The raiding tactics of old had become the past.

'Just one vast push at the right time and the battle will be done,' went the oft-repeated wisdom amongst the loyalists. Some commanders disagreed, some even took contradictory action, but their defiance meant little. It was a matter not of the small numbers, or of individuals. The groundswell of force, of strength and weakness, as measured in hundreds of thousands, in millions; that was what mattered, and individuals held no significance.

FIVE

Iron Warriors
Dagger point
Questions

‘All units, cut engines!’ Kord shouted the command as another sonic boom rang through *War Anvil*’s interior. Sacha was swearing, hands pressed over her ears. Kord was watching the auspex. It must have been a direct orbital drop, straight down from the edge of the void, fast, the kind of thing you only did if you were going straight into a war zone. He could see the aircraft now, small pips of light streaking across his screen as they banked east. Another sonic boom split the air above them, then another and another.

‘It’s a full flight!’ shouted Zade. Kord was adjusting the screen, throwing its viewpoint as wide as it would go. Blurred markers streaked the screen. They were out on the edge of the vast plateau which the Tallarn-born called the Khedive. The enemy formation they were tracking was forty kilometres in front of them, just at the edge of sensor range.

Another thunder crack. Zade was not wrong, a full flight of warplanes had just dropped directly above their position. That might mean they were seconds away from being wreckage. The only thing holding him back from that conclusion was that they were still alive.

‘How did they find us?’ shouted Sacha.

Kord ignored her. He took a quick breath, felt his pulse steady, and flicked over to the regiment-wide vox.

‘Squadron leads, this is *War Anvil*, what are you seeing?’

‘Six aircraft, so far. They are coming back around, banking towards the east,’ the voice was loud but level. Zekenilla, Kord knew without looking that she had shut down her squadron on a coin as soon as he gave the order.

‘They ours?’ Abbas from the First Squadron lead tank, his breath ragged. Shock? Possibly, more likely anger. That was normally the way with him.

‘No signals,’ said Origo. *‘They are spitting out a hell of a lot of auspex distortion. If they hadn’t come down on top of us we wouldn’t have known they were here. Probably not ours, but probably not looking for us either.’*

‘Doesn’t mean that they might not take the chance to come back around and pick us off,’ snarled Abbas.

‘This far away from anything else, maybe they are just wondering what we are doing,’ said Zekenilla.

‘If we stay still maybe they will think we are already dead in the dust,’ added Origo.

Kord took another breath.

‘Hold position,’ he said. ‘If we find we are still alive in a few minutes we can worry about other things.’

He listened, straining to hear the aircraft over the vox hiss. Was that rumble them, or just the wind on the silent hull? The screen showed him a series of distorted marks that might mean that the aircraft were still banking, or had already cut a course to the east. The seconds stretched on.

The roar of rockets and the crack of lascannons did not come.

That does not mean they won’t, thought Kord. *This is a battle of hunters and prey. Assume you have escaped and you make your death certain.*

‘Sir.’ Origo’s voice cut into his thoughts. *‘I have a read on the quarry. They are still moving. Much longer sitting here and we lose them.’*

He switched the view on the auspex. The estimated position of the patrol they were tracking was drifting into blurred uncertainty.

‘Sir,’ Abbas said. Kord could almost hear the Tallarn-born lieutenant purse his lips as he chose his words. *‘Colonel, with all respect, what are we doing out here?’*

‘Searching for answers,’ said Kord.

‘Sir,’ still Abbas, still holding his emotion on a lengthening leash, *‘it’s just a sweep patrol. Might not even be Legion machines.’*

‘I saw a silhouette as the mist thinned five kilometres back,’ said Origo. *‘It looked like a Predator.’*

‘Even if it is,’ pressed Abbas, *‘they are just looking for targets to take out. Targets like us. If we go much further the smaller machines aren’t going to have enough fuel to get back to the shelter.’*

‘They aren’t on this planet to fight!’ snapped Kord, and regretted it as soon as he said it. Silence.

‘Sir?’ It was Zekenilla, her oh-so-steady voice touched with concern.

Kord shook his head. All of his officers, and most of those that rode under his command, knew what he believed. They never asked him, and he never talked about it. It was an unspoken understanding that had never been tested. Except now they were on the edge of their fuel radius, watching a quarry, which only he believed was important, disappear into the distance.

He shook his head, closed his eyes, and began to speak, suddenly unable to hide his weariness.

‘They thought they had won as soon as they let the first bomb fall. So why come down here after that? Why not just move on?’ He opened his eyes, wishing that he could take the suit off and rub them. ‘You have seen it as well. Legion patrols far from their bases, in areas that have no strategic value. They are not looking for targets. They are covering the ground, or keeping it clear for others that follow them. This is one of those patrols, way out, heading towards nothing important. If we want to know what they are here for, we follow them.’

‘That’s full of it!’ Abbas spat. An uneasy silence fell, like the pause between seeing the flash of a bomb and being hit by the blast wave. But when Abbas spoke again his voice was filled with exhaustion rather than anger. *‘There needs to be no reason for this war. We are here because we are. We lost at the Sapphire City because we were outgunned and out-fought. There is no other reason. No hidden truth that makes sense of it. It just is.’*

‘I will let you have that, lieutenant,’ said Kord, and his voice was stone. ‘This one time.’

‘Command authorise this, sir?’ asked Abbas.

Kord said nothing, there was no point. They all knew the answer.

‘Origo, you got anything to say to this?’ asked Kord.

They all respected the scout. He had volunteered, one of the first. He had been there with the rest of them at the fall of the Sapphire City. Cold as a knife blade, that was what most of those who met him said.

‘There is always another side to things’ said Origo at last. *‘Always.’*

‘Aircraft have passed, sir,’ said Zekenilla.

Kord shook his head slowly, glanced at Zade and Sacha. They were looking away, leaning on the gun. They looked as though they were trying to catch a few moments of sleep. They were not of course. His crew would have heard the exchange, but he knew that they would not say anything. He had got each one of them out of the ruin of the Sapphire City, and they would follow him without a word. But Abbas had a point. This was the last moment they could turn back, and if they were going to step into what waited beyond they had to do it willingly. All of them.

‘All units, this is *War Anvil*. You know why we are out here. We are chasing ghosts that no one else believes in. Some of you might not believe in them either, but you know me. Whether you believe me or not, you all have a choice to make now – turn around and head back to the shelter, or follow me. We move in twenty seconds. *War Anvil* out.’

He shut the vox off.

‘Mori, warm the engines up. Everyone else, you heard that, I’m afraid you don’t get the choice.’

‘Don’t really need one, sir,’ said Sacha.

War Anvil woke to life. Kord waited, counting the seconds off in his head. When he reached twenty, he keyed the vox again.

‘All units, start up the engines. Let’s get moving.’

Gradually, one after another the machines of the Tallarn 71st began to roll across the earth and into the mist. One machine, an Executioner, peeled away from the others as they fell into formation around *War Anvil*. The lone machine turned south. After a few minutes it was lost from the screens and sights of its comrades.

‘*So,*’ Kord heard Abbas’s voice over the vox, and could not help smile. *‘Igra decided this was not for him. Shame. Where are we going, colonel?’*

‘Into the unknown,’ replied Kord.

Hrend paused on the edge of the tunnel threshold. The wind wound yellow vapour over the land before him. He had not slept again since the primarch had come to him, and he would not sleep again until he returned.

If you return, itched a thought at the back of his awareness.

His Dreadnought brothers stood to either side of him. Blunt slabs covered Orun’s Mortis frame, the barrels of his doubled lascannons catching the passing streams of fog like fingers held in running water. On his other side, Gortun was turning his head unit slowly from side to side, spinning the drill claws of his fists up, and then letting them spin to stillness, over and over again. The tanks of the Cyllaros assault group were formed up behind them, tracks still on crusted earth. At their centre sat a Spartan carrier and a bloated mobile drill machine. Of all the machines in the group these two had to survive if the mission was to succeed. Everything and everyone else was expendable.

‘*Master.’* Jarvak’s voice spoke the word to him. He did not reply. He knew what his lieutenant was going to ask. *‘What do we wait for?’*

‘Nothing.’

The tunnel mouth they stood in opened in the side of a mountain range. A shallow slope slid down to meet low hills in front of him. Beyond that the land undulated away into the fog like the waves of a frozen sea. Above the tunnel mouth the bare rock of the mountain reached up to the hidden sky. The tunnel itself had been the entrance to an abandoned mine network. The Iron Warriors sappers and stone-wrights had connected it to their growing network of the Sightless Warren within a few days of the first shelter falling to them. Now it had provided Hrend and his force a door into a silent corner of the surface.

What are we that we have made this? The thought pulled at Hrend.

He adjusted his view, zooming in on where a line of pylons marched across the crest of a hill, and into the murk.

‘Do you think of the past, Jarvak?’

‘*No, master.*’ Jarvak’s voice cut into comms static. ‘*I think of the task I must perform. I think of my duty.*’

‘Duty?’

‘*The duty we have to the primarch.*’

‘What is that duty?’

‘*To never fail. To never prove weak. To never break.*’ Jarvak’s answer came without hesitation, but Hrend caught the note of puzzlement at the edge of the words.

‘Why?’

‘*Master?*’

‘Answer.’

‘*We are Iron Warriors.*’

We are Iron Warriors. That found an echo in his own thoughts. *We are the Olympian-born, the Legion that did what others would not deign to do, the breakers and makers of war. We are the wronged, the slighted, the forgotten strength of an Imperium that turned its face from us even as we gave it the iron of our blood.*

‘What does it mean to be an Iron Warrior?’

‘*To be iron withi–*’

‘Now. What does it mean now?’

A pause, filled with the sound of the wind blowing the death shroud of a planet.

‘*What it always meant,*’ said Jarvak at last.

Hrend said nothing, and then spoke across the vox to his entire group.

‘Forward.’ He stepped out of the tunnel mouth, and into the waiting desolation.

The *Sickle Blade* hit the edge of Tallarn’s atmosphere, and threw a cloak of fire across its wings. It trembled and sang as it plunged down through the air. Black ceramite shutters blinked closed over the gunship’s canopy, and suddenly the view of the rancid planet was gone from Argonis’s view. A projection of the world beyond filled his eyes instead, the complexity of reality stripped down to lines of light and sensor data. He was flying by hand, feeling the craft twist against bands of thickening air.

Behind the gunship, the Iron Warriors void-fighters peeled away to circle the re-entry point. The remaining six craft swung in closer to form a box, four Lightning Crows and two Fire Raptors. Argonis heard the terse words of each pilot flick across the vox. They were good, each movement and formation change crisp and precise, but Argonis could not shake the idea that the Iron Warriors flew with the same blunt efficiency as a resentful serf who wanted a duty done as quickly as possible. That was not fair, of course. The Iron Warriors were formidable in every sense. They just lacked something under their skin of iron.

‘You trust-believe the operative Jalen?’ Sota-Nul spoke across the vox. They had not spoken in the hour since the *Sickle Blade* had launched, but she spoke as though continuing a conversation that had continued without pause. Perhaps in the tech-witch’s mind she had simply cut back into the discussion of Jalen’s lack of information, as though resuming a recording from a mark.

‘Them, not *he*,’ said Argonis. ‘When you talk of the Twentieth Legion you should never think that you see them all. If you see ten then there are a hundred you do not see. If you see a hundred assume that there are a thousand. If you see one alone assume there are ten thousand.’

‘Is that your own wisdom?’

‘The Warmaster’s.’

‘He does not trust them…’ said Sota-Nul, and he thought he heard something rattling and serpentine in her voice. ‘Despite their alliance to his cause?’

‘His remarks,’ he said carefully, ‘were, I believe, intended as a compliment of their mode of war.’

Argonis watched as the altimeter counted down. They were within the lower bands of atmosphere. He blinked a rune, and the shutters flicked back from the canopy. A swirled soup of fog pressed against the armourglass. They were above a huge plateau that bore the name Khedive, diving directly downwards, accelerating into the grasp of the planet’s gravity. Just above the ground they would flick up from their descent, then slam into a ground-hugging curve. The XVI Legion called this manoeuvre Ahagress, ‘the dagger point’, in Cthonian. The Iron Warriors had simply referred to it as Assault Manoeuvre 23-b. The ground was coming up fast. He triggered the gunship’s ground-sweeping auspex. The shapes of war machines blinked in his sight, bright with heat and hard metal edges.

‘You have not answered,’ said Sota-Nul.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘I neither trust nor believe the Alpha Legion, and what the Warmaster believes is not for me to know.’

‘But you are his emissary.’

‘Yes. I am.’

‘*War machines active in insertion zone.’* The heavy voice of the Iron Warriors escort commander cut into the vox. *‘Threat status unclear.’*

‘Leave them,’ snapped Argonis. *‘Even if they are hostile they won’t be able to touch us. Maintain pattern and course.’*

‘*Confirmed,’* said the Iron Warrior. Argonis watched as the altitude count drained down into smaller and smaller values.

‘Yet…’ Sota-Nul’s voice lingered on the word. There was something unsettling about it, something more flesh than machine, but still not human. ‘Yet even

though you neither believe nor trust the operative Jalen, we still follow where he guides us.'

'You do not need to trust a weapon to wield it.'

'And that is what you do? You are sure?'

The altitude value at the edge of his sight pulsed amber then red. Beyond the canopy the fog parted for a brief instant, and a bare plain expanded beneath him. For an eye-blink he saw the scattered shapes of tanks. Then he triggered the anti-grav and the gunship snapped up. G-forces hit him like a blow. For a wonderful, terrible second it felt as though he were both floating and falling without control. Then he slammed power into the thrusters and *Sickle Blade* punched forward, and the thunder of its passing vanished behind it.

She waited in the dark and talked to herself.

It was cold. Her enhanced physiology let her discard the discomfort of the dropping temperature, but she still registered it. She had left the enviro-suit on. One of the suit's very limited advantages was that it kept the chill out. She had cut all power in Vanquisher 681 before she had killed its crew. That part of the plan had been simple.

The machine's controls were not complex. She had waited until the rest of the squadron had spread out, and then let one of her net-flies crawl out of her suit and bite into the tank's vox and comms systems. From there it had been easy to slowly guide the squadron to where she needed it. Over the course of an hour she had teased Vanquisher 681 further and further away from its comrades without anyone realising. By the time she cut the power in the tank there was a very small probability that the rest of the squadron would find it. The crew had not panicked at first, and when they had it had played to her advantage. Then the waiting had begun.

She had begun the self-dialogue after four hours.

'Question: What is the chance of error in the termination projection?'

'Answer: High. The factors are unknown and all outcomes are approximations.'

It was a basic technique of the Vanus Temple, one of the first that initiates mastered. As much as mental skill and data were the foundations of the Vanus arts, doubt and questioning were trained into their psyches from childhood. The first stage of this training came from responding to the questions of a master, and then by mimicking that technique through assuming the viewpoint/intellectual framework of another person. Eventually the question/aggressive-doubt technique became part of their basic awareness. In time the back and forth of self-interrogation sank down into the architecture of their subconscious. Most Vanus rarely revisited the technique consciously, but Iaeo had taken to doing so during her deployment. At first she had thought of it as a form of mental cleaning,

keeping her functions grounded. After a while she wondered if it had become a consequence of operating without direction, a compulsion.

In the quiet of the Vanquisher's hull she flipped between questioner and answer, vocalising both. In her mind the questioner was always Master Senus, her mentor for her first decade in the Temple. His sour shrunken face grinned out each challenge from a pict-perfect memory.

'Question: What is the basis of the current termination projection?'

'Answer: That the presence of *an emissary* is seen as significant by the Alpha Legion. That the presence of the emissary represents a change in the problem field. Where there is change there is opportunity.

'Question: State your current target.'

'Answer: Apex Alpha Legion operatives within the Tallarn war locale.'

'Question: Name and identify individual targets.'

'Answer: Alpha Legion Apex Operative, cognomen Jalen.'

'Question: Outline target's current location, nature, capabilities, connections and resources.'

'Answer: Demanded information unknown.'

She paused. In her mind the memory image of her mentor's face grinned. It was not a pleasant expression.

'Question: Outline base-level information related to target.'

'Answer: Multi-level infiltration of loyalist forces on Tallarn by human, or human approximate operatives. Sub-level of bribed, coerced, or converted assets likely to exist within survivors of Iron Warriors viral attack, because of prior infiltration of Tallarn by the Alpha Legion.'

'Question: Project the likely meaning of "emissary" in the context of the problem field.'

'Answer: An actor sent by an external power as formal representation of that power. As the Alpha Legion is not dominant within the enemy forces, the emissary is not to them. The Iron Warriors are the dominant authority within the enemy forces at present. The emissary is, therefore, an individual sent to the Iron Warriors from another power base. This analysis has a 76 per cent accuracy value.'

'Demand: Expand beyond primary analysis.'

'Answer: Given a blank reading of power values within the enemy forces, *an emissary* implies at least a peer relationship of authority, and suggests a dominant relationship. The emissary is from a higher authority than the Iron Warriors. The emissary is from Horus Lupercal. This expanded analysis has a 38 per cent accuracy value.'

In her mind's eye her mentor's desiccated mouth spread into a dagger-slash smile.

‘Question: How does this offer a termination solution on the designated target?’

She paused again.

‘Answer: The presence of an emissary from Horus represents a change in power structures, an overall alteration in the problem field.’

The memory of her mentor just stared at her, eyes glittering in mocking triumph.

‘Answer clarification,’ she began, paused, felt her own hesitation, and shivered. *To doubt brings truth*, said another voice in her head, *to be unclear is to fail before you begin*. ‘Answer clarification: The emissary allows for an expansion of the problem space, and possible elimination of targets by manipulating ignorance and knowledge within the enemy forces.’

She stopped. She could hear her own heart beating through her blood in the silence of the Vanquisher’s interior. She saw the memory of her mentor lean forward, looking down at her, the light catching the implanted membrane over his eyes, turning them to blank silver.

‘Assertion,’ he whispered with her voice. ‘You are clutching at uncertainties.’

‘Response: There are possi–’ The words caught in her throat.

‘Assertion: You don’t see a clear outcome path. Assertion: You don’t know what you are doing. Assertion: You are going to make an error.’

She blinked. Suddenly aware of the cold inside the Vanquisher again.

‘You are going to make an error, Iaeo,’ she said quietly to herself.

She stayed still and quiet for a long while after that, eyes staring into space while she counted seconds.

At last the probability that the squadron were still searching for Vanquisher 681 shrank to nothing.

It was time.

She uncurled herself, and reached across the slumped body of the tank’s commander. The tank’s communication and vox systems came online. She triggered the signal she had prepared. It was a broad-spectrum distress broadcast. Dozens of these signals washed the comms network of Tallarn, the dying gasps of war machines who could not reach home. Both sides tracked down the sources of such signals near to their shelters. Functioning war machines were valuable in this war, even if the dead were pulled out of their hulls.

The signal began to ping out into dead air, and Iaeo listened and waited for the Iron Warriors to hear. She had positioned Vanquisher 681 close to the patrol screens which ran around the Sightless Warren’s southernmost entrances. Somewhere in the Iron Warriors base the signal would be heard, and recovery vehicles would come to pull the dead hull beneath the earth. Once she was inside the Sightless Warren she could begin the next stage.

She curled back into a ball, and watched the signal transmission light pulse. She considered beginning the self-dialogue again, but decided not to. The sound of a rising wind rattled down the outside of the hull. After a moment she thought it became a voice scratching at her from memory.

You are going to make an error, Iaeo, it said.

PART TWO
PILGRIMS

Tallarn was changing. Dawn broke across the planet in a ragged line. On the surface the light grew brighter, dissolving into the fog so that the air seemed soaked in a dirty brilliance. From orbit, if one looked down at the correct angle, the new day was a luminous cord pulled across the planet's surface. Each day had begun like this since the virus bombing, and it seemed that it always would. Except that, here and there, the new light found holes in Tallarn's shroud.

In places the fog had thinned, and the ground had begun to dry, black sludge caking to a dry layer under the sun. Shrinking pools of slime dotted this landscape. In places the hard crust covered deep sink holes of black liquid beneath. War machines had been lost to these hidden wells, their weight shattering the crust and plunging them into the void beneath. The turrets and barrels of some stuck up from the ground like dead hands reaching for air.

Dust began to replace the fog in these dry places. Winds shivered across the flats, picking up the powdered layer from the top of the ground and tumbling it up into the air. The human crews of tanks began to recognise the dust storms by the dry rattling sounds they made on the outside of their hulls. 'The voice of the dead' they called it.

Six days after the failed third attack on the Sightless Warren, the first squadron of war machines was lost to a storm on the plains of Khedive. Their wrecks were found by chance three weeks later. Lightning from a massive storm had crawled over their hulls, fried their systems and detonated their munitions. The wind had then stripped the corroded paint and soot from their hulls.

The fog swirled on the edge of the drying areas. It still covered much of Tallarn, but it too was changing. Churned by fire from battles, and the pillars of energy hurled from warships, it boiled with its own currents, spinning across the seas and slime-sheened mountains. Heavy with soot and the residue of great and terrible weapons, it spawned storms that dragged sheets of black rain through the dissolving rubble of cities.

The survivors of Tallarn felt the changes too.

The Hell Above was dying, they said. In place of the death mire of the old, a new land was emerging, fathered by war and mothered by poison. It was a hungry child too, filled with spite and hunger for their lives. As with so much of the battle, the survivors reached into the language of their past to name the changing surface of Tallarn. 'Yathan' they called it – the 'land of lost pilgrims'.

SIX

Comrades
Black Oculus
Observer

‘Origo?’ Kord spoke the name carefully. His head was swimming, hovering somewhere on the boundary between exhaustion and hallucination. ‘Origo?’ he said again, checking as he did so that the vox was set to the scout machine’s frequency.

‘*Yes, sir,*’ came Origo’s voice, dry and wrung out. Kord licked his lips. His tongue was dry.

They had lost the quarry three days before. The Iron Warriors had simply vanished; one second the scouts were saying that they could see them, and the next the vox was filled with confusion. Finally a numb resignation settled into Kord like ice water. The auspex screens were showing merely static, as though the air itself had become nothing but a blizzard of distortion.

They had carried on for another twelve hours on the same heading after they had lost their quarry. No one spoke except to check headings and status. Kord remained quiet, even as the instinct to ask for fresh reports itched at him. They had settled into the silence for four hours, and at the end of it Kord had given the order to move out on the same bearing as before. No one had said anything other than the briefest of acknowledgements. That had been two weeks before, two weeks of pushing onwards sipping recycled water and nutri-paste from tubes inside the suit. They had not seen anything in that time, not a silhouette of a vehicle, not a scratch of code on the wind. At first he had been able to hear the tension in the voices of the others over the vox. Then that had faded to a dull monotone, which blended with the fog beyond. Even Sacha and the rest of his own crew had faded into soundlessness. He could not say he blamed them. He was not sure if he felt alive himself.

‘*Was there something, colonel?’* asked Origo.

Kord breathed. He was not sure why he had begun this.

‘What should I do, Origo?’ the words came before he could help them. They hung in the pause that followed. *I sound so weak*, he thought. *Weak, broken*, cracked.

‘*With all due respect, sir, that is not how the chain of command works.’*

Kord almost laughed. He felt giddy.

‘We won’t find them again, will we, Origo? The ghost I was following is gone, isn’t it?’

‘If this is the old flats south of Kussank, then we could travel the two hundred kilometres we have already covered again before we saw its edge. They might be anywhere within that space, or somewhere else entirely.’ Origo did not add the implication of those facts. He did not need to.

Kord clicked the vox to reply, but said nothing. After several seconds of fizzing silence he released the transmission key. He closed his eyes, but kept the vox open. He began to notice the heat and noise of the machine, the warm clamminess of sweat on the seals of his suit, the stuttered clatter of the tracks turning, the way that Sacha twisted to get comfortable every few minutes. It was as though his mind and senses were reaching for something to take the place of the thought that kept rattling through him.

I was wrong.

Three hours after the last sighting he called a full halt. The regiment had scattered into a ring, guns and sensors facing outwards, power, heat and air turned down to a minimum. He had ordered all crews to sleep. He wondered, however, how many of them would sleep. He could not, he knew that without trying.

After several minutes he opened the vox to Origo again.

‘Is there supposed to be anything else out here?’

‘There was a settlement on the northern edge of the flats, a shelter too. We could perhaps make it in thirty-six hours if we went straight and fast.’

‘Are you saying that we should run for safety?’

‘Isn’t that why you’re asking?’

‘They are out here. We lost them but there are others.’ He paused, realising that the words had come without him thinking about them.

‘You believe that, sir? I mean really?’

‘Yes…’ he began, and he heard the truth come wearily out of his mouth. ‘Because there has to be a reason doesn’t there? A reason for why this all happened, a reason why Horus is fighting the Emperor, a reason why the Iron Warriors came here, a reason why we are here, a reason for where we are going.’

‘*Where are we going?’*

He looked down at where the glass of the auspex screen blinked with runes.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Sometimes… sometimes, knowing the answers does not help.’

‘No… perhaps… but we have to believe they exist.’

‘*Who are you trying to convince, sir? Me, or yourself?’*

‘Both.’

‘*Well I–’*

‘*Colonel,’* Abbas’s voice cut through Origo’s. Kord felt the tiredness slide back behind a layer of adrenaline. *‘I am getting a signal. Very faint, but it’s there. Seventy-five degrees from north.’*

Kord began to work the vox set. He could hear the signal now, a shift in the tone of the static. There was something there all right. It sounded like a voice.

‘All units, this is *War Anvil*. Engines and weapons live. Heading seventy-five degrees from north. Crescent formation. Slow and careful.’

They moved out, tracks clattering through slow revolutions. Muttered signals snapped between the machines.

‘I see something!’ Abbas’s voice came across after they had gone five kilometres.

‘Steady,’ said Kord.

‘*Visual contact,’* called Abbas. *‘It’s a tank. Can’t identify class.’*

They moved closer. Kord could almost feel the eyes of every member of the regiment scanning their sights and screens.

The faint sound in the static suddenly became a voice.

‘…please help, can anyone hear…’

‘I don’t like it,’ Zekenilla’s voice cut in. *‘Why did we not hear their call until now?’*

‘*Powered down perhaps, until they saw us,’* said Origo.

‘Keep on heading,’ said Kord.

‘…Please, oh golden gates of Terra,’ came the distorted voice. *‘Please, I can see you, please…’*

And then Kord saw it. Sitting beneath a low rise was a Vanquisher, its turret rotated to the side, the tip of its long barrel touching the ground. Dust and corrosion had rubbed the red-and-black of its heraldic colours into a series of pocked patches.

‘Acassian Line Breakers,’ said Sacha. ‘Been out here for a while. Can’t see any damage.’

She was right. The machine looked intact, but it was slumped to one side, its right track submerged beneath the grey crust.

‘Please,’ said the voice again. *‘Please. I know you’re there. We don’t have much power left…’*

‘Sir, what are we going to do?’ asked Sacha.

Kord was staring at the Vanquisher’s hull.

‘Sir?’

‘All units full stop. Origo move the scouts close. Get your eyeball pressed against its hull. All other units hold position. Stay sharp.’

Kord switch his vox to the frequency the pleading voice was speaking on.

‘Unknown unit, this is Colonel Kord of the Tallarn Seventy-First, please identify.’

‘*Thank goodness,*’ the voice sobbed back. *Male*, thought Kord. ‘*Thank goodness…*’ The words crumbled wetly, so that Kord could almost hear the tears.

‘Identify,’ he said again, turning his head to nod at Sacha. She returned the nod and pressed her eyes to her gunsight. The main gun was already loaded.

‘*Gunner Tolson…*’ the voice gasped, ‘*Acassian Eight Hundred and Seventh.*’

‘What is your situation?’

‘*My situation… can’t you see?*’

‘Listen to me, Tolson. What happened?’ asked Kord. A sob sucked over the vox, but then he heard the man take a series of breaths. When the voice came back it was steadier.

‘*We ran into an enemy unit running to the east,*’ said the voice. Kord felt the words shiver over his skin; he was aware that he was holding his breath. ‘*We lost two. We ran. Then the track sunk, and we could not get out.*’

‘Where is your commander, Tolson?’

‘*We…*’ the man’s words caught. ‘*We started to run low on air…*’

Kord blinked, suddenly aware of the air as it passed over his tongue.

‘You are alone?’

‘*Yes, but I can drive it, the machine, I mean. I think it could move if it was shunted out.*’

Kord nodded. The machine looked like it could be pushed out of the soft ground that had caught its track. He keyed the vox onto another channel.

‘Origo, tell me what you see.’

‘*It’s jammed, but could come free.*’

‘Anything else out there?’

Kord flicked his view to a straight magnified display down *War Anvil*’s gunsight. Just beyond the stranded tank and the three scattered scout machines, the fog swirled in uneven cliffs and curtains.

‘*Not that I can see, sir,*’ came Origo’s reply.

Kord nodded to himself.

‘Abbas,’ he said, ‘Get *Grave Call* and her dozer blade up here. Shunt the machine out.’

‘*Sir,*’ came the curt reply.

‘Tolson, we are going to shunt you out of there and get you moving. Then you are coming with us.’

He cut the man’s tears and thanks off as they started.

A second later Abbas’s squadron swept into sight. The dozer-equipped Executioner *Grave Call* was in the lead, its three siblings spread around and behind it in a V. Kord zoomed his view closer, tracking the machines. Getting the

stranded tank free, that was one thing, but he was not thinking about that. All that he could think of was the enemy force that the surviving crew member had mentioned. If they could get the man calm enough to work the tank's auspex he might be able to backtrack to the enemy's last position. There could not be many Iron Warriors patrols out in this isolated reach of Tallarn, and that might mean that they had just stumbled on a lead.

Something caught his eye in the fog as he pulled his view back to the stranded tank. He did not know what he had seen, it had been so brief, an image caught as it vanished behind a curtain.

He swept the gunsight back. The fog beyond the low dirt ridge had thickened again. His mouth opened.

What had it been?

Cold on his skin.

Had it been… a figure…

Grave Call was within ten metres of the stranded tank now.

No, that could not be. Except…

His hand found the vox.

'Tolson,' he said, trying to keep his voice steady. The vox crackled. 'How long did it take the air to fail?'

'Sir…?' Tolson's voice was ragged with relief.

The *Grave Call*, had rotated its turret so that its gun pointed to its rear. The pistons holding its dozer blade extended, dropping it to the ground.

'How long?'

The fog parted along the ridge behind the stranded tank.

A figure was standing there; still, graphite black, the dust of the drying earth falling from its joints and armour plates. It was not human, it was not even trans-human. It was a cyborg. A Thallaxi. And it was looking directly down at Kord.

'All units!' the shout roared from his throat.

The stranded tank exploded. Jets of molten metal blasted from each face of its hull. The *Grave Call* blew apart as the jet cut through its hull. A sphere of plasma flew out from the dead machine, struck another tank, and flipped it onto its side like a toy slammed by a child.

The cyborg brought its thick-barrelled meltagun up and fired. A red neon line split the fog, touched Abbas's tank, and a second, brilliant white sphere blinked into being.

Kord jerked his head back from the sight as white-bright light bored into his retina. *War Anvil* shook as overlapping blast waves broke over it. There were voices shouting all around him, shouting across the vox, through the pressed tight space of the tank. He tried to blink away the bright smudges burned into his sight.

Beyond them he could see shapes moving on the auspex screen, red threat marks rising from the dead dust of the ground to close on him.

The memory of Perturabo's voice came to Hrend as he dreamed.

'What are we?' Perturabo asked.

The question surprised Hrend, but the answer came without him thinking.

'We are iron.'

'And what is the purpose of iron?'

'To endure. To cut.'

'To be weapons of war.' Perturabo nodded, and turned half away, the plates of his augmented frame flowing over each other. He raised an arm, and turned it over seeming to examine the weapon bonded to its back. Hrend did not know the exact design, but recognised volkite charge discs and energy feeds. 'But we are fighting a war that is not like the wars of old. The edge has been taken from our blades, the strength from our shield. The universe we thought existed was a lie.'

The dream ended, the lingering image of Perturabo crumbling into the static swirl of fog in his sensors.

For a second the feeling of fading dreams and memory lingered, more real than unreal, even as they vanished. He shivered and his Dreadnought frame creaked in sympathy. He turned his head and looked around him, trying to remember where he was and what he was doing.

A line of black jagged rocks rose through the thinning fog to his left, biting up into the air, and marching down a slope to a valley floor which waited somewhere out of sight. The assault group were lined up beside him, stationary on the crusted earth slope. The brick slab shape of Spartan 4171 loomed to his left. Orun and Gortun stood a short distance behind him, and the rest of the group's war machines formed a diamond around them. All of them had their engines and systems wound down to minimum power. He remembered where they were now.

A voice was talking, the last word it had spoken sliced off at his wakening.

'–h out a specific target. We could meet resistance in either direction.'

He still did not feel fully part of what was going on around him. Reflexively he checked the time lag since he had last been conscious. Less than a second had passed. He looked at the seconds click past, and felt his recent memories return.

He and his group were halted in the lower foothills close to an area the humans of Tallarn had called Nedden. They had stopped to make the decision on the direction in which they should proceed.

'East…' A new voice trembled across the vox, draining down into a panting breath. The voice trailed off, and Hrend could feel the silence on the vox thicken uneasily.

'You tell us to go east, Navigator?' he asked.

‘*Yes…*’ said the rustling voice. The fingers of both Hrend’s fists clamped shut at the sound. Even from the vox it was like sand grating over glass. ‘*The rift opens. Its scent calls. The taste of night is like sugar. East runs the water though there is no stream, only the eyes… eyes like the dark-bright moon…*’

‘Silence,’ he growled, and the Navigator went quiet.

Hrend had only seen the creature once as it was being loaded onto Spartan 4171. It was not an experience he wished to repeat. It had moved with an irregular grace, gliding, twitching and veering without discernible pattern. The exposed flesh of its head and hands was grey, and crazed with black veins which stood proud of the skin. A metal plate covered its forehead, keeping its third eye locked behind closed, plasteel leaves. The eyes beneath were blood-red from edge to edge, the irises a broken swirl at the heart of each. Hrend knew its name: Hes-Thal. He, for it had been a male, was one of the Navigators who had been at the tillers of Perturabo’s fleet as it had plunged into the black star at the heart of the Eye of Terror. They had still had their third eyes open when the ships fell into that other space. It had killed many of them, and altered the ones who remained. ‘Black Oculus Navigators’ was what the primarch had called them. Hrend had become one of the few that knew of their existence when he had accepted this quest. It was an honour he did not relish.

Whenever he had to interact with the altered Navigator, he felt a hunger to be ignorant of their existence again. But without Hes-Thal their task was impossible; the Navigator could see, or sense what they sought, though that sense seemed as erratic as the creature himself.

‘We turn east,’ said Hrend, into the waiting vox. He began to walk. The tracks of the tanks began to turn.

‘*Ironclad…*’ the Navigator’s voice slid into his ear.

‘Yes.’

‘*I see you, Ironclad…*’ Hrend heard the words, and suddenly was sure he could feel something inside his sarcophagus, something delicate tracing lines across the chewed remains of his skin, something with long, thin fingers. The Navigator’s voice returned. ‘*I… see… you… a morsel of flesh pulled from the death father’s mouth… I see you curled in your tomb… I see you dream…*’

Hrend saw the land around him, but suddenly everything was different. The fog stripped back as if burned away by sunlight. Everything was brilliant and clear and bright. Everything was burning. His feet were moving, and beside him the block shapes of Sicarans, Predators and Venator hulls shimmered in pools of shadow. Sounds came to him as he looked at them, sounds like the snicker of blade edges and the rattle song of bullets feeding into a gun.

‘What?’ he began, but the word hung on its own because the Navigator’s voice came again.

‘I… see… you… I see the whole… I see the seed… and I…’ The voice trailed away. Hrend’s sight suddenly cleared, and the sensation of fingers stirring the fluid around his body vanished. He was striding over the ground, his sensors peeling back the fog not with light but with the stark stream of scrolling data. He knew without knowing why the Navigator within the Spartan had turned its gaze from him.

‘What?’ he said again, as though clearing it from a jammed thought.

‘I see you, and I…’ whispered Hes-Thal as though falling asleep. *‘…and I am sorry.’*

Hrend marched on, following a line into the east, trying not to hear the Navigator’s words scratch at the back of his thoughts.

The Master of Core Reach I came to Argonis in his chamber complex.

The rooms were three levels down, in a region of the Sightless Warren that had been the first to be assimilated into the buried fortress. The Sapphire City Shelter had been its name before, but the Iron Warriors had stripped it of that name when they had remade it. Core Reach I was its new title, and the blunt efficiency of the IV Legion now pervaded its every corner. Work details moved through its corridors in tight groups, hauling loads of shells, armour plates and provisions to the areas that would need them. Harsh light and fresh air billowed through the passages and chambers from repaired and carefully maintained lighting and ventilation systems. Every door and lift shaft had a guard. Most were from the human regiments bound to the Legion. The iron skull and bonded unit numbers marked their armour and skin. Legionaries watched over more vital areas, flanking doors or looking out into chambers, like worn steel statues.

Argonis and his entourage had been given a cluster of sparse chambers close to the central command areas. They had been permitted to go wherever they pleased, and no one had questioned their presence anywhere. The Eye of Horus opened all doors. Even so they had learned nothing besides the manifest truth that Tallarn was a battlefield, which gave up victories sparingly and drank the blood of all who trod her surface. Argonis had walked the miles of the Sightless Warren, had reviewed battle plans, and seen caverns filled with troops and machines. None of it had told him anything besides the fact that the IV Legion were trying to win Tallarn the way they always won wars, by battering their enemies to ruin. He had found nothing: no suspicious facts, no concealment, nothing.

Had his instinct been wrong? Was the truth they were hunting a ghost?

It had been the tech-witch who had suggested that they change their approach. Argonis had resisted, but as the days became weeks, and the weeks clustered into months he had agreed that there was no alternative. If there was something hidden then looking at the surface of things was going to tell them nothing. They had to

peel the skin off and look beneath, and that meant that they were about to do something that brought a taste of bile to his tongue when he thought about it.

He turned when the chamber doors opened. The Iron Warrior who entered was a little shorter than most Space Marines, and the face was a flattened lump of scars and stitch marks. A blank silver ball stared out from where his left eye should have been, while the right met Argonis's with pale green coldness. A crimson-and-yellow centurion plume rose from the plough-fronted helm held under the newcomer's left arm, and his right rested on the pommel of a sheathed short sword. Bronze lightning bolts split the dirty iron of his breastplate and shoulder guard. Behind him stood two warriors in the chevroned bronze of the Legion elite. The Iron Warrior's name was Volk, and he held command over much of the Sightless Warren, and he was there because Argonis had summoned him.

Argonis waited.

After a long second Volk spoke.

'The Commander of Core Reach One gives honour and greetings to the emissary of the Warmaster of Mankind.' Volk bowed his head, just enough to show respect, but not enough to imply deference.

'The honour is ours, and we give you thanks for the efforts you have made to aid our mission.' Argonis bowed his helmeted head, careful to make sure the gesture was not as deep as Volk's. The relative depth of his bow told everyone present where the higher authority lay. Most importantly it told Volk. Behind him he heard a rustle as Sota-Nul bowed in turn. 'It is pleasing to see that you have come in person to ensure that our latest request is met.'

Volk's expression flickered, his scarred features rippling.

'We deny you nothing, emissary, but I do not understand how this request is relevant?'

'He is not unintelligent, this one,' said Sota-Nul, her voice a private whisper from his helm's vox. 'That could be problematic.'

He ignored it.

'Relevant?' he let the word hang in the air. 'Everything is relevant.' He watched a muscle twitch under Volk's metal eye.

'If he will not comply there are other ways-methods that can be used,' Sota-Nul said in his ear.

'The primary armouries are yours to see. All seventy-two of them.'

Argonis nodded, still not breaking eye contact.

'The Lord of Iron has laid his preparations for war well.'

'As always.'

'A long war…'

'For whatever might be needed.'

‘Need is decided by who is judging that need.’

Volk laughed, the deep sound growling through the bare chamber. His armoured frame shook with the sound. Argonis saw broken stubs of teeth flash in the crooked line of Volk’s mouth.

‘Do you ever let an opportunity to sound like an arrogant cur pass?’

‘Sometimes,’ Argonis reached up and unfastened his helm. He smiled himself then, stepped forward and clasped Volk’s extended fist in his own. ‘But you provide so many opportunities it would seem impolite.’

‘Does Cthonia only breed weaklings with sharp tongues, or is it just you?’

‘Does Olympia still just breed halfwits and siege dross?’

‘Only the best of both.’ Volk’s scars twisted into a smile again. ‘It is good to see you. Even in all of this, brother, it is good to see you.’

‘All this?’

‘This war. It is a long way from Carmeline, and the Reddus Cluster.’ Volk let a breath hiss from his nose, and shook his head. ‘A long way along a strange path.’

‘It is,’ said Argonis, holding his expression and head still. ‘And things change.’

‘Yes. They do.’ Volk said the words carefully, frowning. ‘You come from the Warmaster. In person. As the bearer of his presence. Somehow I never thought that kind of honour would be yours.’

‘Neither did I.’

Volk raised an eyebrow, but did not press the point.

‘And as you can see I have had my wings clipped. A hawk on an iron perch.’ He grinned, and tapped the metal sphere of his left eye, and then pointed at Argonis. ‘But even with just one eye I could still tear you out of the sky.’

‘I doubt it. Unless half blindness has somehow improved your skill as a pilot.’

‘Oh-ho. So the high orbits of command have not taken your claws. Good. Do they still call you – what was that ridiculous title? The Unscarred – that was it wasn’t it?’

Argonis smiled briefly, and then allowed his face to harden into seriousness

‘What happened?’ he asked. ‘Since Isstvan, what happened to the Fourth?’

‘I went to the Cathian Gulf after the Massacre.’ Volk closed the fingers of his hand with a clack of ceramite on ceramite. ‘Broke the holdings around Selgar. But the primarch summoned us here, and so here I am. I am sure that all of our activities are fully known by the Warmaster.’ He shrugged, and did not look back at Argonis.

‘Things have changed, old friend,’ said Argonis.

‘Civil war will do that.’ Volk nodded, his mouth a hard line. Argonis thought of the squadron master he had known and fought with for almost a decade. The warrior in front of him was the same, still the combination of wit and brutality

that seemed at odds with his Olympian birth. But there was a weight there now, as though thoughts he could not speak were churning within.

‘Why are you here? Why is your Legion fighting this battle?’

‘You have asked the primarch that?’

Argonis nodded. ‘Then you have your answer.’ The Iron Warrior turned and made for the door. From far off a distant rumble shook the still air. A thin thread of dust fell from the ceiling. Everyone in the room looked upwards.

‘Surface bombardment,’ said Sota-Nul. ‘They are attacking again, as predicted.’

Volk’s eyes flicked to her then back to Argonis.

‘You have unusually poor timing on this occasion, brother. My attention will be needed soon, but the armouries are open to your inspection… Emissary.’ A hard note of formality had returned to his voice, and he gave an abrupt gesture to one of his two guards. ‘Taldak will be your guide.’

‘My thanks,’ said Argonis. Volk bowed in reply, and then he turned and was gone out of the door.

Argonis looked at Taldak’s blank, masked face, and clamped his own helm over his head. Sota-Nul’s transmitted voice spoke to him as soon as the helmet’s connections closed.

‘That one is dangerous and clever.’

‘He always was,’ he replied, making for the door. Taldak fell in before him, his bolter held low in his hands.

‘His presence and the presence of this guide may cause us complications.’

‘I am not sure I will tolerate what you are implying.’

They crossed the door out of the chamber and began to walk down the curving passage beyond. An alert alarm began to sound. Yellow lights began to strobe in the ceiling. Another tremor ran through the floor. Despite himself he felt adrenaline spiking his blood.

‘You should overcome your reluctance,’ purred Sota-Nul. ‘We might need to kill more than him.’

‘There will be no need.’

‘There may be every need,’ she said.

Iaeo felt elation as she watched the emissary and heard the tech-witch’s words. The emotion washed through her, raw and burning. She had to slice it out of her awareness before it corrupted the calculations.

Her primary phase manipulation had worked. It had worked. Even if she denied her emotions she could not deny that truth.

True danger lives in the moment when you feel invulnerable. The aphorism floated through her thoughts even as she refocused her mind. There were many, many reasons why she should not feel victorious.

Her own security was tenuous at best. The Iron Warriors controlled the tunnels of the Sightless Warren with ruthless precision. While the loyalists were scattered and broken into different commands, the Iron Warriors infused every aspect of their operations with control. Security was not simply tight; it was a coordinated pattern of overlapping countermeasures and contingencies. Guard patterns changed. Movements of personnel and material were continually catalogued and crosschecked. Sweep and search patrols probed deserted areas at random. She had only seen comparable compliancy once before, and that had been during a short-lived incursion onto the Phalanx several decades before. She could not help but admire the craft in the IV Legion's paranoia.

Despite how aesthetically pleasing the Sightless Warren's countermeasures were, they had slowed her progress. She had overcome the problem in the end by making a series of boltholes in places where safety only came from the ludicrousness of trying to use them as hideouts. The skull-space of a Reaver Titan of Legio Fureans undergoing repair was her bolthole for the first two cycles. A set of faulty decontamination airlocks proved most useful, as did the piles of damaged and blood-marked hulls awaiting repair. She moved between these locations according to purely random patterns. It was not ideal, but it was the best solution she could achieve.

She had needed to establish a workable pattern of evasion before she had been able to turn her energies to the emissary. At first she had thought that she would need to find a way to reach one of the Iron Warriors ships, but that had proved unnecessary. The emissary was there in the Sightless Warren. The tech-witch had been a problem at first; her presence had killed a dozen net-flies before Iaeo had compensated. Once she had done that she had been able to throw her awareness over the trio and begin to squeeze for data. Every movement they made she saw, every word they said, every signal they thought private, all of it went to Iaeo.

She began to build prediction profiles and individual data-models of Argonis and his entourage. They lived in her skull, shadows projected by the living creatures she watched.

The model of the astropath called Prophesius was a sketch of ephemeral possibilities. She was almost certain that the creature was not fully human, or that its nature had altered substantially, probably by psychic means. In its actions she had seen total obedience. There were also signs that it had almost no self-determination, beyond the ability to obey commands. The mask locked to its skull was clearly not a simple device. She had also decided not to remember the shape details of the runes cut into the mask's metal. Looking at them had distorted her thoughts. But even though the data-model was thin it gave her enough to deduce Prophesius's role and importance; the astropath was a link between the emissary and Horus himself, but a link that had yet to be used.

Sota-Nul was another matter. She was like no other tech-priest Iaeo had encountered. Her physiology was at variance to her kind. There was as much of the biological about Sota-Nul as there was mechanical. The line between the flesh and metal was also narrow. That was also unusual, almost unprecedented. Almost. Then there were her speech patterns. She had a human voice, produced not by machine, or vox, but by air, throat and mouth. Iaeo was certain of this; she could hear it in the texture of Sota-Nul's words. But she had never heard her breathe. Worst of all were Sota-Nul's decision/reaction patterns. Where the rest of her kind often eschewed emotion in favour of logic, the tech-witch seemed to follow both instinct and logic in ways that Iaeo found hard to predict. She did things because of calculation, and because of emotions such as anger, hunger and spite. That was not good. It was not good at all. All the little factors meant that Sota-Nul could only be one thing; she was one of the reborn of Mars, one of the so-called new priesthood, the Dark Mechanicum.

Then there was Argonis, beautiful Argonis, so filled with the echoing martial pride of a lost age. He was a warrior, noble, loyal, focused, ruthless, but he was also a betrayer, with blood on his hands. He was so loyal yet so bound to his own principles, a person cut in two and then bound back together. She was not certain, but there were indicators that he had not been sent to Tallarn as an honour, but as a penance, or as a form of exile. She wanted to know why, she wanted to know why very badly indeed. There was possibility in that silent space, the possibility of death and mayhem. Sometimes, when she played recordings of his voice over and over, she thought she could almost see the truth, a hidden shape betrayed by its shadow.

Between these three she could feel her projections spiral and whirl. She knew almost all that they knew. She knew they had contact with the Alpha Legion Operative Jalen, and that they did not trust him, that they almost believed that everything they saw on Tallarn was a lie.

And of course it was.

Ships upon ships had come to Tallarn since the battle had begun. Many had died, some had fled back to the warp, but most came in small groups, ragged clusters and lone battlegroups. Not since the Iron Warriors main force arrived had a substantial fleet arrived together. The fleets which vied with Perturabo's forces were an amalgam of all the disparate forces drawn to make Tallarn their battleground.

The coming of the Golden Fleet broke that pattern.

It came from the warp without warning. Clusters of war barques, bombardment barges and battle cruisers, spread into a wide sphere from the wounds of their re-entry. The Eagle Claw *drifted at their centre, its ancient hull glimmering in the thin light of the stars.*

In the time of the Great Crusade the Eagle Claw *had changed from a lone ship reeving far ahead of the Emperor's crusade forces to the flagship of a fleet. Each ship of that fleet had been a prize of conquest, as had the wealth which filled their holds with mercenary companies from across the galaxy. The fees paid to the Sacristan Geneo-het warriors alone were said to have been enough that they would have beggared kings. Yet the mistress of the Golden Fleet had paid them for a hundred years of service in advance, and they were not alone.*

Beside the forces bought by coin there were those bought by oaths and loyalty. The orphaned Knights of House Klaze walked at the Fleet Mistress's command beside automata painted in auric and ebony to show their perpetual service. Three hundred warriors of the XIII Legion rode in the Eagle Claw, *and the bodyguard who stood at the ship mistress's shoulder had stood in the battle lines of the first battles of unity. During the Great Crusade, some had objected to the half-mocking title given to the Emperor's privateer pathfinders, but it fitted the Golden Fleet and its mistress to perfection. Rogue Trader, they had called her, and now she had brought her war fleet back from beyond the edge of conquest, and found a war.*

From her throne Rogue Trader Sangrea, Mistress of the Golden Fleet, looked on the light of Tallarn, and listened. She had left the Imperium from Tallarn a decade before and struck out into the dust cloud reaches of the Morai Veil. She had served and built the Imperium since a time when its name and nature were still fresh with newborn strength. Yet for all her power, she knew that she would never be a part of the Imperium she was building. People of her kind had faced a choice with the coming of the Emperor: serve out in the dark, or be destroyed. She had chosen to serve, but a part of her had always hoped that she could return and die in the lands she had helped create. The truth that formed piece by piece

as she listened and read the data from her auspexes said that the Imperium she had left had died, that everything she had helped to build was burning from within.

When she spoke her words were quiet.

‘Take us in,’ she said.

SEVEN

Machines
Will of the father
The trust of allies

The world outside was spiralling smoke and blood-red sheets of flame. Kord could not look through his sight for more than a few seconds. When he did, he saw death rising from the ground and walking to claim him.

The spindly black silhouettes of Thallaxi advanced beside the hunched shapes of battle automata. They began to fire. Spirals of lightning flicked out, struck a scout machine, and crawled through its armour. The scout detonated in a spray of igniting fuel and tearing metal. Kord's sight danced with nausea-bright pixels. The auspex was sparking, its screen a swirl of spiralling images. The external vox was screeching like a chorus of dying crows.

Kord sucked in a breath; it tasted of electricity and metal.

'Fire!' he shouted. Sacha was still shaking her head, eyes blinking widely behind the lenses of her suit mask.

'I can't see,' she said.

'Fire! Now!' She reached for the gun's control and pulled the trigger. The battle cannon slammed back. Kord felt *War Anvil*'s demolisher fire a second later. The shell landed blind, burrowed into the ground and exploded. Dirt fountained up into the smoke. He saw walking machines.

Zade was already feeding shells into the cannon's smoking breech.

'Forward, full speed,' he roared. He was not looking at the auspex. There was no point. This was a disaster, a complete wild disaster. He had lost. That was certain. He could not see where or what of his units remained. The enemy had complete surprise, and there was no way out. No way at all.

He looked through the sight again in time to see an automaton turning ponderously, towards him, guns tracking for a target.

No way out.

The automaton had them. Sensor blisters on its torso scattered laser targeting lines towards *War Anvil*, like reaching hands.

No way at all.

'Forward! Full speed!'

Kord saw the laser lines converge on him and *War Anvil* as the tank hit the automaton with full force. The impact shook the hull. The automaton was

scrabbling at the front of the tank, its legs dragging beneath as it rammed onwards. Kord could see the cog marks and glyphs scored into its armour. *War Anvil* lurched forward, tracks turning faster and faster. The automaton vanished. A sound of breaking and tearing metal reverberated from beneath the tank as it lurched on.

Kord was breathing hard, eyes flicking between any battle information he could see, vision blocks, gunsight, the memory of where all his machines had been before. They must be on the bottom of the ridge, the enemy spread in front and to either side of them. Skins of smoke and flame sliced the view in all directions in narrow corridors. He just hoped that somehow, someone was covering *War Anvil*'s rear arc. Lascannon light was whipping through the air, and he could feel the skin-itch of exotic weapon discharge. The main gun fired again. He had no idea what they were shooting at. High notes of shrapnel and the thump of explosive rounds overlaid the engine roar. Something hit one of his sight blocks and crazed the armourglass as he looked through it. He snapped his head back. His head spun for an instant.

Behind them a disc of rust-red metal and chrome rose from the loose earth like the back of a turtle breaking the surface of the sea. The figure standing on the disc might have started as human, but that was long ago. Its body was a frame of brass and blackened plasteel. The poison winds blew through the latticework of its ribs. Cables snaked from its back. Sparks flashed in the air around it as disc and rider rose. The fog-heavy air shimmered around it as it slid forward. Red beams ringed with concentric circles flicked from the disc. A teeth-aching screech followed each beam, audible even over the roar of explosions and churning metal.

'What is that?' screeched Zade. Kord was staring, he knew what it was, what it must be: a war magos, a master of machines and death, and it was there for them.

'Got you!' shouted Sacha. The main gun fired. The shell struck the disc and its rider true, and shattered into fire. Sacha punched the air, her growl of victory lost in the ringing echo of the explosion.

Kord had half turned away from the sight when the disc broke from the fire cloud. The robes of the rider fell from it in charred scraps. The body beneath was like a model of a human made by a watchmaker. A bubble of actinic energy flickered as it grated against the fire and smoke. The disc tilted. The air beneath it shimmered. A black sphere sat at the centre of the disc's belly, like the pupil of a great machine eye. Kord felt a void open within him. In front of him Zade was still sliding a fresh shell into the breech, Sacha was screaming at him. Tendrils of sickly light were pouring across the disc as though draining into a hole. The black sphere ached in Kord's sight. He felt something tug at his sweat-sheathed skin. He could taste electricity on his teeth.

A beam of purple-wreathed blackness shot from the black sphere beneath the disc. For a second the world seemed to freeze, colours to flip to white, light to dark, shadow to bright brilliance. And then there was a sound like a thunderclap in reverse. Kord felt warm liquid running from his nose. He felt like he was spinning through the air, waiting to hit the ground.

‘*Noon Star*’s gone!’ Sacha’s voice was a shriek of hysteria. ‘Gone, just–’

‘Fire,’ he croaked.

But all he could see was the disc rotating towards him, and the power begining to build around the black sphere

‘Fire… Someone, fire.’

A flash of las-light cut across his vision, shattering the disc’s shield into a cloud of oily sparks. *War Anvil*’s demolisher cannon fired an instant later.

The shell hit the disc’s centre and broke the black sphere. Darkness rushed out from the broken disc, as though trying to swallow the light of the explosion. Kord felt tears gush from his eyes. The pain of a thousand needle punctures stabbed his face.

‘Finish it,’ he managed to call. The main cannon fired. The blackness shattered, then sucked into a pinprick of night before vanishing. Kord felt himself swaying in his seat. Through watering eyes he saw battle automata stutter to a halt, then stagger and begin to slump to the ground. Everything was very far away though, and swirling, swirling like water. He was… the last thought that interrupted his fall into oblivion was to wonder who had fired the lascannon bolt that had broken the disc’s shield.

‘Where do we begin?’ he had asked. His father and master had lowered his head, the black gloss of his eyes spreading to pool in the sockets of his eyes.

‘*Within,’ Perturabo had said.*

‘The powers that exist beyond the walls of reality mock our strength, and try to turn this war to their own. There is no one left to trust besides the Warmaster, and serpents coil around him. There are two wars now, the war to topple the Emperor and the war against those who would betray us in turn. And in that war we need to be sharpness and obliteration, we need weapons, we need to be iron once more.’

‘Your will is mine.’

‘You do not know what I ask yet.’

The memory, which was half a dream, fell away from Hrend’s sight. He was standing on the side of a valley, the machines of his assault group spread out beside and behind him. Before him the valley side fell away in spills of grey schist. Above him the fog held to the hidden mountain caps as a rippled yellow ceiling. The air in the valley was clear, but the jagged shapes of the rocks made the returns from the sensors dance with ghost shapes. To his left the mountain

pass itself opened beyond a wide canyon mouth which split the bare rock of the valley's end like an axe wound. The canyon beyond formed a pass between two mountain peaks, and must have borne a road in Tallarn's past. Cracked slabs of stone formed the remains of a crude road surface within the canyon's walls, and signs of its course could be seen tracing a line across the valley floor. It had begun to snow while they waited, the wind spreading black and yellow flakes across the grey ground.

Above him, further up the slope, Spartan 4171 waited, hull-down behind a ridge. Even at this distance he thought he could feel Hes-Thal looking out at the world, and seeing… He had no idea what the Navigator saw, only that it had led them to have to cross the mountains.

'*Target is two kilometres distant,*' said Jarvak, his voice juddering as the signal was shredded by the walls of the pass. '*Speed and signatures consistent. Unit count is sixteen. Force strength is heavy. I count two heavy-grade signatures, Baneblade or equivalent yield. Twelve battle tank hulls. Two smaller units, scouts or armoured cars.*'

Hrend listened to the words as he cycled through the raw sensor data. It was not clean, but he had told Jarvak to make sure that he was not seen or detected. That put limitations on reconnaissance information. They had picked up the enemy force moving into the canyon as they were moving into it themselves. Hrend had considered simply meeting the enemy force head on and battering their way through, but had decided to withdraw to the valley and wait. Jarvak's machine had carried on alone, its systems flooding the space before it with distorting sensor ghosts. Now he had seen the strength of the enemy force, Hrend judged his decision to withdraw correct.

'We hit them as they exit the pass,' he said.

'*They are wary,*' said Jarvak. '*There is wreckage in the valley floor beneath the pass. This is not the first time this place has been a battleground.*'

Hrend made to reply, but suddenly the world was gone.

The sound of breaking steel rolled over him. There was fire, the strobing blink of white starburst, and he was burning, his skin melting into his armour…

His sensor sight jumped back into cold awareness.

'*Master, what is your will?*' asked Jarvak. Hrend looked at the time count at the corner of his sight. He had been silent for almost two full minutes.

'Estimate time until they exit,' he demanded.

'*Thirty minutes,*' said Jarvak. Hrend added the timing to his battle plan. Nothing needed to change, he had crafted every point correctly. Every unit in the Cyllaros had absorbed the plan and was placed to execute it. It was a future moment of destruction ordained in every detail. Now it simply needed to become.

'Withdraw to the designated position,' he said. 'Wait.'

He engaged the fingers of his fists. They moved. He did not feel it. He would…

…the fire was his skin, and his screaming was the roar of muzzle flare, and the hungering crash of rending metal. He was breathing ash, and every breath was a blaze of white fire…

'Enemy will exit canyon in ten minutes,' called Jarvak. Hrend tried to blink as sensor data spilled into his vision. His Dreadnought frame clanked as servos tried to answer the dead nerve signal. He saw Jarvak's Sicaran emerge from the canyon mouth, its position painted by cold blue markers. It settled into place behind a low rise on the opposite slope of the valley.

'Waken weapons,' he said. The Cyllaros obeyed. He tried to blink again, and again his body twitched in confusion. His hands were burning. The fire held in their palms were blisters of bright pain in the cold dark. He had to let go, had to allow the fire free. He had to…

Coldness, and the dead silence of a lightless amniotic tank.

'Two minutes.'

The first tanks emerged from the pass, two smaller machines, running fast on narrow tracks. They split and moved to either side of the valley. Hrend could hear their auspexes as faint, metallic whispers. Two blocks of battle tanks came next, spreading into two lines behind the scouts, bracketing the valley floor as they came forward. The air was thick with sensor waves now. They were not as powerful, nor could they see as far as the sensor eyes of Legion machines. That limitation and the Cyllaros's cloud of countermeasures would hold for a little longer.

The first of the true giants rolled onto the valley floor. It was a Baneblade, the father of a dynasty of destructive children. Its hull was twice the size of the three battle tanks which rolled in front of it. The turret atop its gun-studded hull turned with slow purpose, the gaze of its vast gun tracking across the snow-shrouded land. Behind it came its cousin. Twin clusters of multi-barrelled mega-bolters jutted from the block of armour atop the second super-heavy tank. It was a Stormlord, and the sight of it made Hrend pause as fresh combat estimations scrolled across his sight.

There was no choice, though; they had to act now. He waited as the twin super-heavy machines broke into a staggered pattern, and the last squadron of battle tanks took up line formation behind them. It was a significant force, and well arrayed. He could read experience, discipline and training in the way that the machines moved. The Cyllaros were outmatched in numbers and fire power. Normally the most direct method of addressing that disparity would have been to trap the enemy in the pass between the canyon walls. That was not an option here. Hrend and his machines had to pass through the valley and through the mountains. The pass needed to remain unblocked.

The enemy cleared the gates to the pass, moving forward at the lumbering speed of the two behemoths at their heart. Their overlapping auspex signals were clawing at the Cyllaros's sensor baffles. That concealment would not last much longer. Snow swirled down from the clouds above. The dirty flakes settled and began to melt on the metal skin of the war machines.

'Now,' he said.

The Cyllaros fired as one. Streams of energy converged on the valley floor. The Baneblade's turret blew into the air. An instant later the conversion beamers turned its flank plating into a molten cloud. Fire rolled out in every direction. Snowflakes became steam. Two of the three battle tanks riding in front of the Baneblade skidded and tumbled over. Lines of accelerator shells hit their belly armour, punched inside, and their death flames screamed to the already burning air. A third tank jumped across the ground like a kicked stone. Above the valley a glowing pillar of smoke spread into a thunderhead. The rest of the tanks were still moving forward, carried by shock and momentum.

Hrend watch three target runes blink out.

'Go,' he said.

The tunnel shook as they walked through the strobing alarm light. Spills of dust shook from the ceiling and dusted Argonis's armour. Sota-Nul was a too-close presence at his shoulder. Prophesius was a little further back, matching speed with him as though tugged by an invisible chain. Figures moved around them, hurrying, running, never coming too close, never looking at the trio directly. The tunnel shook again, then twice more in quick succession. None of them looked up at the quartet of strangers passing in the opposite direction.

Taldak walked ahead of them. Argonis had been watching the warrior since they had left their chambers. There was a stiff set to Taldak's shoulders, his movements powerful but rigid. He reminded Argonis of a bull grox he had once seen forcing its way against the current of a river, blunt head low, strength battering each step forward as though to do anything else was to admit defeat. It was a quality he both admired and found stifling. It also made the prospect of what they would need to do much more dangerous.

A series of deep tremors ran through the walls. The lighting flickered. Argonis looked up at the dust spilling past the strobing gloom.

Orbital bombardment, thought Argonis, as the bare slabs of rockcrete quivered. *Concentrated fire, at least two ships in firing pattern, possibly more*. They were hitting the area directly above the complex core. Seismic charges most likely. That and enough plasma fire to melt half the surface rubble to glass. He could not fault the usefulness of the timing.

'You are certain that what we seek will be there?' he said into his helm vox without looking around. To anyone observing them he would appear to be

walking in silence, the short-range vox signal passing between them alone.

‘No,’ replied Sota-Nul. ‘Nothing is certain, but it is likely that we will be able to gain access from the location we are bound for.’

‘No killing,’ he repeated, after a long pause of silence.

‘It is not in the necessary parameters of our plan,’ she said. ‘As you know.’

‘No matter what, if one of the Iron Warriors dies here we lose everything and gain nothing.’

‘Not necessarily.’

Argonis’s jaw tensed. Inside his helm his lips had peeled back from his teeth. Sota-Nul’s voice scratched through his nerves even over the vox. Especially over the vox.

‘I am surprised that such a prospect causes you concern,’ she continued. ‘You were present at the kill-cleanse of Isstvan, were you not?’

‘They are our allies?’

Sota-Nul began to speak again. He was unpleasantly aware that her voice had added a mocking edge to its monotone.

‘There are recordings I have heard-reviewed, the last transmissions between different Legions on Isstvan Five. They believed the same falsity-fact until we began to kill them. Perhaps some of them died still believing it.’

Argonis felt his hand twitch towards his weapons, then restrained the instinct. The tech-witch would have registered the gesture, he was sure. He would have felt satisfaction if he had thought she cared. He was certain that she did not. Nothing seemed to intimidate Sota-Nul. She was not without fear, but was as though she found the concept amusingly redundant.

‘The Iron Warriors have denied us nothing,’ he said carefully.

‘Except the truth,’ she said. ‘That is why we are here.’

A unit of human troopers in heavy enviro-suits ran by, pausing to give a stylised salute that Argonis did not recognise. Taldak made no gesture of acknowledgement. They had not seen another warrior of the IV for some time. Even here at the heart of their fortress the Iron Warriors were spread thinly, tens of thousands dissolved into millions of human soldiers.

They walked on without speaking, the blare of alert alarms and the beat of the bombardment shaking the ground filling the pause. He glanced at Sota-Nul as she glided on, her robe rustling as it dragged along the floor. Her shoulders were moving, flexing as though she were breathing hard. But she was not breathing. In the time he had spent in her proximity he had never heard her breathe once.

‘What is your concern in this?’

‘One of my kind was requested by the Maloghurst, and sent by the most knowing and high Kelbor-Hal. I am an emissary to an emissary. I am here to lend aid. You know this. You are simply struggling with emotions.’

‘Emotions?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ her voice now the dead-toned texture of a static. ‘Revulsion, possibly disgust, probably loathing. The current actions we are engaged on have elicited a heightened response that your mental conditioning is displacing into other existing areas of emotion that you can understand.’ She paused and her voice slid into a tone which sounded all too human. ‘You cannot feel fear so you are feeling hate.’

He did not reply. He was not sure which was worse: the accuracy of what she said, or that he could hear the relish in her voice.

They turned a corner, and a set of blast doors closed the tunnel before them. Gun servitors flanked the oiled steel. Targeting lasers flickered over Argonis and his entourage, found the authorisation they needed and dropped the aim of their weapons. Taldak took a step closer, and pressed an armoured hand against the doors. A clang rolled through the air, louder even than the alert sirens. The doors ground open. A bare platform waited beyond. Taldak turned his helm to face Argonis.

‘Emissary,’ he said. Argonis stepped onto the platform. The rest followed, and the doors closed on them. A heartbeat later the platform jerked and then began to descend. Argonis looked up. The shaft above them was a black hole boring into the lost dark.

‘We are approaching the correct level,’ said Sota-Nul.

‘Yes,’ said Argonis turning his face back to Taldak. Prophesius took a single, silent step forward.

‘I am truly sorry,’ he said. Prophesius reached out and up, his hand like a pale spider descending on a thread as it touched Taldak’s head.

The images from the net-flies watching the lift platform fuzzed with static. Iaeo switched view as black blobs formed and flowed over the image. Prophesius’s hand closed on the Space Marine’s head.

Active psychic capability, she added the datum to the cloud of observed facts on Prophesius, and switched her awareness to another portion of the net-fly swarm. She blinked as a different set of perceptions washed over her. She had only dared deploy the swarm into the datastacks in the hour before Argonis had begun his own mission to reach them. Part of her hungered to tap into the information held in the vast cogitator and data looms. There was so much there, so much possibility, so many additional factors which could…

No, she had her focus now.

She let out a breath and, as though answering a tremor, ran through the ground. A grumble of distant explosions rumbled in her ears. This time it was strong enough to make her senses flick back to the reality of her physical location. She was briefly aware of the confines of the Mars-pattern tank hull enclosing her. It

was one of 156 burned or damaged hulls stacked in a row in armoury cavern 102-B. It had no turret, or sponsons, and most of its insides were gone. The through-and-through shot that had killed it let the light of distant welding torches flicker across her face. She had sat cross-legged on the floor of the machine for two hours. She had 7506 seconds before the probability of detection became unacceptable.

She flicked back to the feeds of data and watched Argonis. Part of her – a very, very small remnant of empathy – hoped that he would not get himself killed. If he did, that would be exceptionally awkward.

The fury of the Dreadnoughts of Cyllaros unleashed!

There was always a ship burning in the orbit of Tallarn's star. Above the war world battles never ceased, as both sides fought to control the key approaches. Battlegroups came together in spirals of silent light, and broke apart again, leaving the cooling debris of their meeting. Even in the orbits close to the system's star ships clashed, as they tried to skim the gravity and radiation-thick zones to reach Tallarn itself. Further out on the system edge, battlegroups ran the outer reaches of the Oort cloud, hunting for ships fresh from the warp. Battle light never left the skies above Tallarn. But the coming of the Golden Fleet brought a fire to the void like no other.

The first ships to meet the Golden Fleet were a battlegroup bound to Perturabo's command. Their challenges were answered with reassurances, and respect.

They were on the same side, said the ships of the Golden Fleet. They had come to answer the Lord of Iron's call. Of course they would accept forces onto their bridges and move in system under escort. Of course…

The mistress of the Golden Fleet waited until they crossed the distance from black system edge to dead world. Then every ship in the Golden Fleet ran its guns out and turned the ships escorting them into wreckage and burning dust. The forces sent onto her ships were contained, ambushed, and slaughtered. The rest of Perturabo's forces scrambled to intercept the Golden Fleet, but it was already accelerating, bearing down on the dead planet like a sheath of fire arrows falling from a night sky. It fired at every ship that came against them, killing many, and leaving others as bleeding wrecks to tumble in their wake.

From her throne the fleet's mistress watched as the planet grew fat in the bridge's viewport. Signals from the forces opposing Perturabo called out from ships and from Tallarn itself. They went unanswered. She had made her judgement.

Ships from both sides filled the close orbits of Tallarn. Support fleets held station at different hemispheres, trading turbolaser fire at landers. Both sides had sensed a lull and rushed to drop supplies and troops on to the surface. Bulk promethium carriers, munitions barges and macro landers moved beneath shells of escorts. They were vulnerable, but both sides had deployed so that they were screened from enemy fire. They had not prepared for a battlefleet striking them from another quarter.

The Golden Fleet hit a school of bulk carriers which had just begun to sink into the planet's atmosphere. Above them ten battle cruisers held station to protect them. They fired at the Golden Fleet.

Flame swallowed shields and gouged the gilded ships' hulls, but they kept coming. They had selected their targets hours before, while Tallarn was still just a bright dot to the naked eye. They did not know, or care, what allegiance their targets were.

The lead ships of the Golden Fleet peeled back, scraps of shredded shields trailing them. The ships behind them were true battle cruisers, their hulls studded with weaponry, their armour thick under skins of gold. The nova cannons in their prows had been loaded, and the time triggers in each warhead were already running. If they did not fire they would die, but their command crews had come from the nightless moons of Creda and they had fought this way for their mistress many times before. They began to burn, their hulls shedding stone and molten metal as they rode down into the teeth of their enemy's guns. Ripples of shells and beams of energy struck their shields, and slammed into their prows. The sphere of Tallarn filled the views of their bridges, its gravity tugging them down. The fuel transports and their escorts realised the attacker's intent and began to scatter. Heavy with fuel they began to break formation, but by then it was too late.

The Golden Fleet fired. A deluge of nova shells hit the fuel transports.

A flattened sun spread above Tallarn. The energy wave skimmed outwards, catching ships and orbital platforms in a freeze-frame instant. Hulls the size of great cities split, and spilled the blood of their reactors into the burning storm. And the tide surged on, growing in seconds and feeding off ships too slow to slip its embrace. The Golden Fleet fired their engines and flipped over. Kilometres of metal and stone screamed under the forces twisting through their hulls. They rose into the empty void as behind them a skin of fire spilled across Tallarn's skies, fizzing with the death of ships.

Down on the surface, a false dawn ran across the night side of the planet. Showers of burning debris fell like golden coins scattered from a hand. At the poles, auroras of fire and starlight hung in curtains against the sky.

The Golden Fleet left, running for the system edge and the cold black beyond, the light of its inexplicable act of judgement chasing the ships until they dived back into the warp.

Shock rippled through all the remaining forces in the system. Tallarn's disputed orbits had been stripped, the ever-shifting battle for their control reset to neutral. It took even the Iron Warriors a long moment to realise they were facing both the greatest opportunity and most dire threat since the Battle of Tallarn had begun.

In a time that would come later, scholars and poets would give that night a name to mark its place in time: they named it 'The Inferno Tide'.

EIGHT

Breath
Stormlord
Warning

Kord woke to the feeling of heat washing over his skin. He sat up slowly. Red and orange light flickered in from the view slits. He looked out. Fire washed over *War Anvil*. The burning wrecks outside nested close, the flames sheeting from their bones lapping against *War Anvil*'s hull.

Kord felt as though his body had been worked over with an iron bar. The roar of the guns still rang in his ears. He could not hear anything on the vox. He wanted to sleep. The urge was so deep and overwhelming that he felt his eyes begin to close. Sacha was slumped sideways next to him. He could see the crumpled form of Zade down in the space beneath the turret. It was all very quiet, the flickering wash of flames like the water of a molten sea pressing silently against a sinking ship's porthole. He shook his head to clear it, but that just sent grey blotches dancing on his eyeballs. What had happened? He could remember the disc and the explosion as it had detonated. After that…

How long had he been unconscious?

He looked at the auspex screen. It was a blank black, filled with swirling coloured blocks as he woke it. He muttered to the machine, pleading with it to work. It did. Slowly at first, then, with a blink, it showed him the world beyond the hull. Heat blooms swelled and pulsed across it. He could see the shapes of wreckage, lots of wreckage, each chunk outlined in heat. There was nothing else. He shifted the view wider, but the heat-drowned desolation just grew.

He keyed the vox. Static first, then a silence which seemed to wait for him to speak. He licked his lips, suddenly aware that his mouth was dry.

'All units…' he began. 'This is *War Anvil*…' he trailed away. Was the rest of his crew even alive? He looked at the air supply levels.

Throne, they were low. He switched to a total band broadcast.

'This is *War Anvil*, if you can hear, respond.'

From somewhere deeper in *War Anvil*'s hull he heard a clank as something metal unlocked. A second later a masked face look up at him.

'Sir,' said a female voice over the vox. It was barely a croak.

'Shornal?' he asked, and the sponson gunner nodded. 'Is no one else…?' he began.

She gave the sketch of a shrug.

‘I don’t know, sir. It’s been quiet for a while. Since the shooting stopped.’

‘Did we take any damage?’

‘No. I don’t…’ She just sat down then, slumping to the floor.

‘Shornal,’ he said, putting every scrap of strength and calm into her name. Her head jerked up towards him. Her eyes were veined blotches behind the suit lenses. ‘Damage?’ he asked speaking the word clearly.

‘I don’t think so.’ She swayed where she sat. ‘But… but the engine went quite a while ago. Don’t know why.’ Her head nodded then came up sharply as though jerked by a string. ‘Sir,’ she added in a smudged voice.

Kord blinked as what she had said soaked into him. If the engines were down then… then… the air supply was running on reserve power. His thoughts were running like thick oil. He blinked, and brought his hand up to his face. The gloved fingers filled his eyes. He tapped the front of his mask, breathed in, felt the smallest trickle of cool air on his face, and realised that they were all very close to dying.

He reached over, trying not to move too quickly, trying to keep the grey fog to the edge of his sight. He pushed Sacha. Her slumped form shifted, but did not stir. He tried to move his legs, to slide down into the space beneath the turret. They would not move. They simply would not move. He looked at his hand, wondering for a dreamlike second if it too would refuse to move.

‘Shornal,’ he said carefully. ‘Can you reach Mori in the drive cradle?’

‘I… think so.’ She began to crawl across the floor. Empty shell casings rolled under her. Inch by inch, she moved out of sight. Kord kept the vox open all the while, trying to take, very, very shallow breaths. The minutes bled slowly past.

‘I’m here.’ Shornal was breathing hard.

‘Mori?’ he asked.

‘Not moving, sir.’

‘Try and wake him.’

‘He’s… he is gone, sir.’

‘Gone?’

‘There is blood all over his eyepieces. Throne!’ she swore, and Kord tensed. The grey clouds grew. He fought his heartbeat down. ‘There’s blood on the controls, sir. His face… he must have slammed into the rig when we took a hit.’

‘Can you see the controls?’ asked Kord measuring out the words.

‘Yes.’

‘There is a lever, a red lever just beside the controls. You see it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Pull it.’

The noise of a faint clank reached him. Then another. Then nothing.

‘Sir–’

‘Try it again,’ he said. A pause, another clank, another silence. He heard her try and take a breath. How many more times can she try before she passes out, he wondered? Grey drifted across his narrowing world.

These machines are supposed to have hearts that beat forever, he thought.

Clank.

But all hearts could fail.

Clank.

He closed his eyes.

Clank.

War Anvil woke with a shudder of power. Air spluttered across his face and he gasped.

He coughed. The fresh air burned as it filled his lungs. He breathed, and breathed, and breathed as *War Anvil*’s engine plant shook its hull. Relief flooded through him. He looked at his hands, flexed the fingers, and found that he could move his legs. He glanced at the fire light still spilling through the armourglass vision slits. They had to get moving.

He slid out of his seat. He would have to unplug his air until he was in the drive cradle. He took a deep breath and snapped the hose free. A stab of panic gripped him as the air cut out. He dropped into the crawl space under the turret, his feet sliding briefly on the brass cases of shells. Shornal sat next to the driver position, her chest heaving as she swallowed down air. Mori’s corpse hung half in and half out of the drive cradle. Blood had dribbled from his suit’s broken eyepieces and dried in sticky brown runnels on his suit.

The breath he was holding in his chest had started to ache, and he could feel the grey fog pushing at the edge of his sight again. He slotted his air hose into place, heard the valve clink open, and breathed again. He looked around. He could see the unmoving shape of Saul, the forward gunner, hanging from the demolisher niche. He looked down to Shornal. She was breathing more steadily now.

‘You ever driven a machine?’ he asked.

‘No.’ She shook her head. He nodded, and pulled Mori’s corpse out of the drive cradle. It lolled, the dead weight almost pulling him down as he lowered it gently.

‘Go check all of the others. Wake them if you can.’ She nodded, and began to crawl towards Saul in the forward gun niche.

Kord lowered himself into the drive cradle and looked at the controls. It had been over two decades since he had steered a tank. There was blood on the sight block and control levers. It stuck to his hands as he took hold of them. ‘Saul’s alive,’ said Shornal. ‘So is Kog, and Zade, though they are still out.’

‘Sacha?’

‘Can’t tell.’ He could hear the hesitation in her voice.

‘Get into the turret,’ he said. ‘Watch the auspex and vox.’

He turned back to the controls. The assault tank was larger, heavier and more powerful than anything he had driven before. He glanced through the forward viewfinder. The augmented display had dimmed the light of the fires to near black, but he could see the wreck of a machine directly in front of them. Flames gushed from its hatches, and its front armour ended in a twisted ruin. A white blaze, somehow still visible through the soot and flame, ran down the dead machine’s flank. *Mourner*, he recognised without having to think. Abbas’s battered old face floated in his mind as he watched the flames.

Slowly he engaged *War Anvil*’s power, and the tank moved forward, gradually at first, and then with heavy purpose.

‘Colonel!’ Shornal’s voice cut through his concentration. ‘There is something moving out there.’ Ice pulsed from his heart. One of the enemy had survived, or another ambush group had come to see what had happened to the first.

‘War Anvil,’ the tired voice, came over the vox. ‘War Anvil, *this is* Razor. *Respond*, War Anvil.’

Kord felt his hands shaking on the controls.

‘Origo?’

‘*Sir.*’

‘*Razor* is still going?’

‘*Still alive, sir. Yes.*’

‘Anyone else?’

The pause spoke the truth before Origo put it into words.

‘*No other signs of life.*’ Another pause. ‘*We were going to head north. I didn’t think anyone else was alive… until* War Anvil*’s plant started up.*’

Kord nodded, then realised no one could see. The fatigue that had been hidden beneath adrenaline began to nudge back into his limbs and thoughts. With it came another thought, one that he did not want to look at now, the thought that he had done exactly what Abbas had feared; he had killed almost everyone who had trusted him.

‘North?’ he said.

‘*There’s supposed to be a shelter up on the edge of these flats. At least if we are where I think we are*.’

‘All right,’ Kord said. ‘North. Lead us out.’

‘*Sir,*’ replied Origo.

Kord began to feed power into the tracks again.

‘And, Origo…’ The words came without him deciding to say them.

‘*Yes, colonel.*’

‘Thank you.’

Hrend ran into the flames, his strides powdering stone to dust. His meltaguns were singing. The blast wave from the Baneblade’s death hit him. The world vanished in fire and the hail ring of shrapnel. His shields fizzed as they reduced the debris to fire and dust. He could taste his weapons’ need to burn. He could feel the death of metal, and the ring of shrapnel. He was burning, drowning in iron. He was…

…running down the slope towards the spreading shockwave of the Baneblade’s death.

Gortun was running beside him, a wet roar bubbling from his speaker units. The rest of the Cyllaros accelerated across and down the valley floor. Each of them had a pattern of attack, and a set of secondary patterns and target priorities. The trio of Predators were already firing, conversion beamers and lascannons reducing the surviving battle tank from the Baneblade’s guard to a scream of light and shattering metal. Orun and the two Venators were shifting position on the high ground. They would be ready to fire again in six seconds.

Directly in front of Hrend one of the enemy squadrons was pulling around. A pulse of las energy hit the stone beneath his stride. Rock splinters hit his shields, flashing to powder. The dust rattled against his skin. He saw the long barrel of a Vanquisher turn towards him. It promised an end, a chance to rest from war, to let go of iron. But it would never fire.

Hrend jinked to the side, raised his arms, fingers splayed. The Vanquisher was twenty strides away. The barrel of the cannon was a black circle in his eyes. Two spears of white heat leapt from his hands. The cannon barrel melted as it fired. The blast blew out of the top and back of the Vanquisher’s turret.

He ran directly at the wreck. Behind it two more battle tanks were turning, hunting for targets. The air was hissing with gunfire, screaming as the fire rose to stain the clouds above.

A scout tank came around the wreck of the dead Vanquisher. It was fast and the human piloting it had reacted faster than Hrend had estimated. That was a mistake. Hrend levelled his hand. The energy built in his palm. Inside his cocoon of iron, he felt the heat spill up his nerves. It felt impossible. It felt like being alive again.

Gortun hit the scout an instant before Hrend was going to fire. Drill claws screamed into armour plate, as the other Dreadnought shunted the tank across the ground. Its tracks shredded free from its wheels as it gouged through snow and stone. It struck a boulder, and for a second Gortun reared up above it. The teeth of his drill claws glittered in the red, rolling light. Gortun slammed his claws down. Tatters of metal fountained up. Hull plates tore. Hrend could see a figure in a

bulky suit scrabbling inside the split hull. Then the poisoned air found a weakness in the suit, and the figure juddered as his flesh became jelly.

Gortun reached into the wreck's guts, and his claws pinched shut. A ball of flame enveloped the other Dreadnought, but Gortun was standing, wrenching the burning wreck into the air. Hrend heard his brother's roar spill through the vox and air. Then he realised that he was screaming too, running on, his machine form flowing as if it were his own muscle, as if it were following a hunger he had not realised he had, a hunger to live again, a hunger to live and burn.

He killed the next tank with his hands. It was trying to turn, its tracks churning rock fragments in its wake. He struck it in the side. One hand clamped around its turning tracks and ripped backwards. A shattered length of track arced into the air above him. The tank slewed as its other track spun it into a circle. Hrend shook as the machine's bulk slammed into him. He punched downwards, just behind the block of a side sponson. The welded join shattered. Hrend gripped and fired his melta. Molten armour bored into the machine's heart and out of the other side. In his sarcophagus Hrend thought he could taste cooking flesh. Hrend stepped back. The wreck slewed to stillness. Flames were spewing from its back in a bright crest.

He stood for a second looking at the dead machine. The battlefield seemed almost silent, the sounds of explosions a dull rumble, like the crash of distant waves. He knew where each of his machines was, but everything seemed remote, as though something had just been unplugged from his awareness. To his left the Predator trio were moving in deliberately erratic patterns on the lower slopes. Lascannon light flicked from their sponsons. The Venators were shifting firing position again. Jarvak's machine was still on the opposite side of the valley, hidden from sight behind the wall of fire and smoke. They had torn the enemy force in half for no loss, the battle plan had unfolded exactly as it should have. Except something was wrong, something that had nothing to do with whether they would survive this fight.

Something was calling him, something within him, something that perhaps had always been there.

Iron within.

He could feel it gripping, pulling him in with a relentless strength. With his own strength. It felt like the promise of air when drowning. It felt like life.

Iron without.

And he wanted to let go. He wanted to let it become. He wanted to feel alive again. He wanted to be more than a corpse clad in iron.

He felt his limbs start to move.

The Stormlord broke from the curtain of flame.

Hrend twisted aside as the machine rammed through the wreck of the machine he had just killed. The hull hit Hrend with armour-cracking force. He fell, his senses filling with blinking warning runes. He hit the ground, gouging a track across the earth. He stopped and began to rise.

The barrels of the Stormlord's megabolter were turning faster and faster. One of Hrend's Predators on the valley side was dead ahead of the spinning barrels.

Hrend pulled a leg beneath him. There was oil on the ground, dribbling from his iron frame, black flecks pattering on dirty snow.

The muzzles of the Stormlord's guns were a blur. The Predators were breaking, scattering across the slope, their guns turning to point at the Stormlord.

Hrend stood. Amber warning runes painted his sight. His shields were gone. He felt pistons twist and gears snap. They felt like broken bones, and shredding muscle. He charged.

The megabolter fired. Shells breathed from the spinning barrels. The side of the valley vanished. Rock, dust and shrapnel spread in a roaring cloud. Shell casings sprayed from the Stormlord, raining on its hull as they fell. The Predators struggled on for a second, their armour distorting as round after round chewed into their hulls. Hrend saw the status runes of the three Predators pulse to amber and then blink to red. He began to run towards the Stormlord. Hrend had shut off his audio sensors when the first shot was fired, but he could still hear the megabolter. It shook the fluid-filled dark of his coffin and into his skull, like the roar of an iron dragon.

He raised his hands to fire. At the edge of his sight he saw two of his Venators moving, trying to outrun the storm of gunfire which churned the slope. They would fail. The megabolter was simply cutting Hrend's force to pieces.

The Stormlord twisted back, tracks screaming and shattering stone. A sponson gun swivelled to point at Hrend. He fire–

The shells slammed into his torso. Fire swallowed his sight. He staggered, his charge faltering. Shell impacts slammed through him. Blood seeped into the amnion around his body. More rounds struck, ringing his world to shrill silence. Part of him – the part which had been forged and trained to war – felt everything and catalogued it dispassionately.

The Stormlord's main gun was not firing at him; if it was he would already be dead. It was a heavy bolter. Its shells were substantial but not potent enough to crack his armour. Yet they could batter him down, hammer him to kneeling, shatter his sensors and leave him blind. They were not firing to kill him, they were firing to hold him until the main gun could turn and reduce him to shards and blood slime. That moment was coming, winding down into certainty with each second he was not moving.

He began to stand, fists raised, forearm plates reverberating as the bolter shells exploded against them. His sensors were blurring with threat markers and damage readings. The fire ceased. He took a step forward. His sight cleared. The Stormlord was pivoting its spinning barrels, glowing cherry red as they dragged fire down the slope, down towards him.

He took another step, damaged servos wailing as he began to level his guns. He willed the missile free from his carapace. Nothing, just a sparking blank feeling of blown connections.

A wedge-shaped hull broke from the screen of fire behind the Stormlord. Scorches marked the brushed metal of its plating. Hrend saw a trio of targeting lasers glimmer in the ash-thickened air.

'Master,' called Jarvak's voice, across the vox, and – as though the word were a command – the Sicaran fired all of its weapons.

The back of the Stormlord exploded in a gout of black smoke. The vast machine lurched, its tracks still turning for an instant before becoming still. Promethium flames spread up its back, as it rocked to stillness. It was not dead though, not yet. It fired all of its guns, panning them across the ground around it, like a half-blind warrior trying to fend off attackers. Hrend ran, feeling the damage to his frame dig deeper. This was foolishness, it was not optimal, and it was nowhere near rational. But he was no longer seeing the world through those eyes. He was the iron within, and he could feel more than he ever had, more than he had in life. He was a weapon, and a weapon could only live by killing.

He hit the front of the Stormlord, and bounded up the sloped front, fist rising. A spear of heat struck the cannon. A sphere of molten metal sprayed outwards. It hurt him. The plates of his armour cratered and blistered. He punched into the wounded Stormlord's hull, gripped onto sagging metal and fired his meltagun.

And the world became silent whiteness.

Frost flashed over Taldak. Argonis felt his own teeth clamp shut as the air became like tar. The Iron Warrior juddered where he stood. Pale mist rose from him. Argonis thought he could see faces and open mouths in the vapour. Taldak's helm was shaking in its socket. A smell of burning hair and honey flooded Argonis's mouth and nose. He gagged. Taldak's arms began to rise, straining as though against a great weight. Prophesius's fingers were glowing where they touched the Iron Warrior's helm. Argonis saw the shadows of bones and blood vessels within the astropath's hand. Taldak began to turn, slow heavy fingers reaching for Prophesius's arm, boltgun rising. Argonis stepped forward and clamped his own hands around Taldak's arms.

It was like touching lightning.

He blanked out. When he came to he was kneeling on the lift platform. The motionless shape of Taldak lay before him, fuming oily smoke.

He pulled his helm off and sucked a deep breath of air. It tasted of bitter iron.

‘That was foolish,’ said Sota-Nul to him. She was bent over an open panel on the platform. Prehensile cables snaked from her robes and buried themselves inside the opening. The platform jolted to a halt.

Prophesius was standing three paces away, utterly still, as though he had not moved. The iron-masked astropath raised his wax tablet as Argonis looked at him. A silver-spiked finger flickered across the tablet.

he lives, wrote Prophesius, scraping the words clean as he finished. *he dreams in the cradle of sharpness and delight. he will wake, and he will remember nothing.*

i will stay.

i will watch him in his dreams.

Argonis nodded. Relief and revulsion washed through him. He reflexively reached for the key to Prophesius’s mask, and found it still there, hanging within the gorget of his armour.

Sota-Nul gave a low hiss, which sounded strangely like pleasure, and doors set into the wall of the shaft opened. Argonis stood. The space beyond was dark, but he could taste charge on the air. The hum of power conduits and machines pressed upon the exposed skin of his face. He slid his gladius free, thumb hovering over the activation stud.

‘You predicted guards,’ he said.

‘Most certainly,’ said Sota-Nul, disconnecting herself from the platform and gliding over to his side. ‘They will be here.’

‘If you are wrong and there are legionaries–’

‘There will not be. This is not their domain. Even Perturabo respects that.’

‘So they will be tech-priests, your kind?’

‘Not my kind. Weaklings, creatures of a lower dominion, fools that happen to follow at the side of our allies. I am of the future, they still are of the past.’

Argonis did not know what she was talking about, and he was certain that he did not want to have that ignorance corrected.

He stepped through the door. The darkness beyond spread out in every direction. He paused as his eyes gathered the scraps of light from the gloom. A narrow walkway extended from where he stood. Beneath it empty space dropped down to a distant floor. Vast shapes rose to either side of the walkway. Sparks flashed occasionally across their surfaces, illuminating patches of metal and tangles of cable. These were the datastacks of the Sightless Warren. In the previous life of the shelter they would have held the data records of troops, supplies and shipping movements of crusade forces that had mustered and shipped out from the planet. The Priests of Mars had laid the core of these great

machines in the early decades of the planet's compliance. They had grown since that time, so that now they spread through the charged gloom like mountains.

Sota-Nul slid past him, hissing with anticipation.

'Where do–'

'So new, so untouched,' said Sota-Nul. 'Ah, you have dreamed so long, but not known how to dream, my children.'

She shivered, her robes rustling in the charged air.

Argonis followed, feeling the weight of his blade in the cradle of his fingers. Worms of charge squirmed and vanished across his armour. He could hear a deep, throbbing buzz vibrating through the air and walkway. They kept moving.

The tech-priest appeared without warning.

Stepping from the shadow of one of the machine stacks, he must have been standing utterly still. Umbilical cables still linked him to the great machine. He blurted a stream of machine code. Weapons, or fingers, or fingers that were weapons, glinted at the end of his arms. Argonis began to move. Sota-Nul moved faster. She flew forwards. The air shimmered around her, oily slicks of light spiralled in her wake. A halo of silver arms spread from beneath her robes. Argonis saw turning blades and injector spikes beneath her robe. Wet flesh glistened with the rainbow sheen of oil. Eyelids blinked over clusters of crystal eyes inside nests of sinew and clockwork. She had no legs, just a column of tangled cables.

The tech-priest tried to twist aside, lightning building on his fingers. Sota-Nul hissed. The electricity arced from the tech-priest's hand. Sota-Nul rattled a stream of scratching machine code as she struck. She folded around the tech-priest. Her halo of tentacles punched down, and the tech-priest stopped moving.

Sota-Nul hung in the air, the twitching body of the tech-priest hugged closed, cables and articulated arms pulsing and squirming. Dark liquid siphoned down lengths of transparent tubes. Argonis thought he saw arcs of electricity running through the liquid. The tech-priest's body began to crumble, its shape seeming to lose structure and substance. Sota-Nul gathered the shrinking ball of its mass into her chest. A wet pulsing sound washed through the air for a long moment. Then she withdrew her array of machine limbs, and the black robes fell back into place. She turned on the spot, the shadowed hole beneath her hood pointing at Argonis.

'I said–' he began, but the tech-witch spoke over him.

'The eightfold wheel must be given its due. It is *their* work that we do.' She turned away, and drifted further down the platform. Argonis felt anger flair inside his thoughts, and then quickly crushed the instinct. Events were rolling now, blinking from instant to instant as time became a pressure wave of momentum. He began to run in Sota-Nul's wake. The tech-witch was singing, a low brittle noise, which ground against the throb of the datastacks. She turned as she moved,

head tilted as though listening. Argonis kept his eyes moving across the shadows. Amber threat markers danced and dissolved into nothing.

Sota-Nul stopped at last. She floated in place, her sharp-edged song growing, and then she too rose into the air. A pair of silvered tentacles slipped out of her. They squirmed through the air, reaching blindly into space. At last she stopped and drifted to a panel set high in the cliff-face of a machine. Argonis had no idea how she had selected the location or how she had known it was there. The twin tentacles slid out, slithering over the machine's surface, and then into sockets.

Sota-Nul jerked, and became rigid. She began to shake. The datastack began to rumble. Argonis felt his hair rise inside the shell of his helm. He sheathed his blade. His bolter was in his hand. His helmet system was pinging warnings into his ears.

'It… is…' called Sota-Nul, her voice rolling higher and higher within each word. 'So innocent.'

Amber threat runes were moving across his sight as he turned his head. Out there in the gloom between the stacks things were moving.

'Come on!' he called, the need for silence banished by the need for haste. Sota-Nul's whole body was pulsing, swelling and contracting, as though she were breathing in, as though she were swallowing something larger than herself. Argonis could see the shapes of the things moving amongst the stacks, the glitter of machine eyes staring at him. Lines of targeting light began to flicker out through the dark. He raised his bolter. Target runes began to flash between red and amber.

'We go now!' he called.

Sota-Nul shivered, and then pulled away, silver tentacles yanking from the stack. She trembled in the air for a second and then began to spiral downwards towards him. Machine voices were rising from the dark. Sota-Nul landed and began to glide back towards the lift platform. He followed at a run.

'What did you see?' he called as the metal grating shook beneath his feet. 'What did you find?'

'A nothing,' she hissed, her voice dreamlike.

'Nothing?'

The lift shaft opened to greet them. Prophesius stood above the still supine form of Taldak. The doors began to close behind them.

'Not nothing,' said Sota-Nul. '*A* nothing.'

Prophesius was scratching words onto his wax tablet.

do you wish the iron one to wake?

'A nothing?' Argonis called.

Sota-Nul nodded slowly.

'An absence,' she said, 'a void, a thing that is not there.'

do you wish to wake?

‘What do you mean?’

‘They have lied to you.’

to wake?

He stood and stared at her for a second. He had known it, had been all but certain ever since he looked in Perturabo’s eyes, but he had hoped that he would not find a reason to bring fresh news of treachery to his father. He had hoped that in this war of broken vows some bonds stayed true.

Lights set into the shaft walls were flashing past as they descended. He turned to Prophesius, and thought of the key to the iron mask, cold against his neck. Then he looked back to Sota-Nul.

‘Tell me,’ he said.

‘No,’ she replied, her metal snakes working inside the platform’s control panels. The platform began to move even faster, sinking into the shaft beneath. ‘We must see it.’

The platform came to a halt two full minutes later. Quietness settled into the air. Argonis found it almost unsettling. His hearts were beating adrenaline-spiced blood through his limbs. Tactical markers were spinning in his sight, telling him that the air was cool here, but tinged with exotic chemicals. Ambient sound was almost nothing, just the distant noise of machinery stirring air. Sota-Nul extended a set of metal snakes into the controls beside the door. Sparks and smoke puffed into the air, and the doors opened. The corridor beyond was smooth rockcrete. Bare lumen-strips ran down its centre. Another small door of reinforced plasteel lay in the distance. Chipped hazard stripes marked its edges.

‘You are sure?’ he asked, keeping his eyes on the corridor.

Sota-Nul glided up beside him, metal tentacles slithering back beneath her robe.

‘Yes, this is it. Not the main means of entrance-exit, but it should take us to it. The likelihood of detection is high.’ She rotated her head towards him. He found himself imagining a grin hidden beneath the hood. ‘You might even have to get your weapons dirty.’

‘The records gave no indication of what they are keeping here?’

‘None, just the name-signifier buried under three cipher layers. They called it Black Oculus.’

‘Black Oculus…’ he let the phrase hang in the air.

He glanced back at the still unconscious form of Taldak, and then at Prophesius. He nodded and stepped into the passage. The tech-witch and the astropath followed. They moved fast. The next door opened to Sota-Nul’s touch, as she fed it the codes she had culled from the datastacks.

More corridors followed, all bare, all quiet. He did not like that, not at all. The air and light changed the further they went. A haze hung on the edge of sight, blurring the edges of walls and the details of distant objects. Shadows clung to recesses like folds of black cloth, while the lumen-strips shone brighter, but gave less light. The rhythm and regularity of deserted chambers and silent corridors began to press into his mind. He caught his concentration wandering several times. He would blink and realise he had walked several steps, and was not even aware of taking them. Every time he would pull himself back to focused awareness, only for it to drain away. It was difficult to tell if the tech-witch was affected, but Prophesius's hands clasped and twitched the further they went. The silence deepened, and the fog in their awareness thickened.

It almost killed them.

Another hatch door had swung open, and Argonis had been stepping through, gun pointing by habit as much as intent. The Iron Warrior standing on the other side of the hatch turned, bolter rising. A slowed sensation of shock ran up Argonis's spine. His senses cleared in a cold rush. He kicked the Iron Warrior's gun. The casing slammed back into the warrior's chestplate. Two rounds roared from the muzzle and hit the wall. Gunshot echoes, dust and smoke flooded the passage.

Argonis came forward fast, slamming his fist into the Iron Warrior three times before he was halfway to the floor. His mind was a sudden focused line, all hot fury and bared teeth. The lenses in the Iron Warrior's helm shattered. Blood misted from the broken sockets with his first and second blow. The Iron Warrior was falling, most likely blinded, but he was far from dead and brought his gun up as he fell.

The decision occurred so fast in Argonis's mind that he was barely aware of its passing. He fired his bolter. The round hit the Iron Warrior in the chest, exploded and punched the warrior back into the wall. Argonis fired three times more: once into the throat joint, once into each eyepiece, each shot a sliver of time apart. The Iron Warrior's head and neck exploded.

Argonis moved forward, gun ready, tracking the space beyond the headless corpse. Nothing, just a section of corridor with another small door in the wall opposite, and a large, circular hatch to his left. His helmet display fizzed as he stepped closer to the circular hatch, and then dissolved into a blur. Squawks of distortion rose from his vox. He pulled the helm off, and looked back at his two companions.

Sota-Nul was already gliding close.

'Very clean,' she said, the slight twitch of her hood indicating the dead Iron Warrior. 'Apart from the first instant when he nearly killed you. But the three kill

shots, one to ensure the throat and mouth could not call an alarm, the other two to ensure fatality. Impressive.'

Argonis did not respond. Part of his mind had simply shut off all of his thoughts about what he had just done. He had not wanted to kill the Iron Warrior, but the only other option would have been to die and to fail in his mission.

'He may still have sent an alert,' he said without looking at Sota-Nul. 'He had time to speak before I fired.'

'No,' said the tech-witch. 'He sent nothing. His vox was disabled, as were most of his auto-senses.'

'Why?'

'Because of this.' She touched the circular hatch as she spoke. 'You will have to open it,' she said, and he could hear a tremor in her voice. 'I…' she began to say, but the word did not finish and she drifted to the floor.

He noticed Prophesius then. The astropath was still by the door they had entered through. He was trembling. His hand was jumping across his wax tablet, writing the same thing again and again.

…black star, black star, black star, black star, black star…

Argonis turned back to the hatch. A wheel sat at its centre. He could see no other lock, just the blank space and loose cables where an access system had been. He reached out and gripped the wheel. His armour was moving with slow creaks and groans of resistance, as though its system were failing. He began to turn the wheel. It spun until he heard a heavy clank from within. Then he pulled the hatch, his protesting armour grinding as he heaved it wide.

The space beyond was dark, and the light coming from behind Argonis halted at the door as though a barrier prevented its passing. He stepped across the threshold. The dark closed over him. For a heartbeat he could see nothing, then his eyes adjusted, and a scene in stark monochrome formed in front of him.

Thin human figures hung from frames of metal. Chains hooked into loops bonded to their arms and scalps. Some bore mutations: additional limbs of shrivelled muscle and stark bone, translucent scales, back-jointed legs, fingers grown to crescents of pale bone. A thick metal band circled each of their heads. Needle-tipped tubes connected their bare skin to bottles of liquid. A turn of his head told Argonis that there were dozens of them in the chamber. His eyes ached as he looked at them, and a dull crackle hummed in his ears.

He knew what they were, or at least what they had been. They were Navigators, dozens of Navigators chained in the dark and sedated. He stepped closer. His armour was a dead weight pulling against his muscles. The first figure he reached was a starvation-thin woman. Slowly he pulled the needles from her flesh. He waited, feeling the instincts in his spine and limbs telling him to get back into the light.

He waited, and time waited with time.

The Navigator's head came up. She gasped air to scream.

Then she went still, then tilted her head, first one way and then another. Argonis did not move or speak.

'I see you,' she said, and her voice was a cold shiver of sound. 'I see you, son of the moon-wolf.'

'What are you?' he asked.

'What are we? We are those who have looked into the light of eternity. We are the ones who have seen the black star.'

…black star… black star… black star… The words repeated in his thoughts, trailing down to silence.

'The black star?' he asked, and found that his lips were dry.

'The dark heart of all things. It was there, and we passed into it and through it, our eyes wide. And we saw…' The Navigator's voice caught, and for a second terror trembled her words. 'We saw all things. The black star… the circle beneath… the Gateway to the Gods… the Eye of Terror sees all.' She turned her head and looked at Argonis. He felt the look. It felt like ice, like falling, and falling without ever finding the release of the ground. 'It is here. It is within. And…' she was trembling again, limbs shaking the frame that bound her. 'And it is looking back at us.'

He left the chamber, and closed the hatch on the darkness and the sleeping Navigators within.

Sota-Nul had withdrawn to the hatch they had entered by. Her shape was swelling and deflating as he watched her, and there was no sign of either the corpse or the blood which had spattered the floor and walls. Argonis walked towards them, his armour moving more freely with each step he took from the door.

'We have to reach the *Iron Blood*,' he said, as he ducked into the passage that led back the way they had come. 'We have to reach Perturabo.'

Iaeo was listening to Argonis when her awareness snapped away from the emissary. The part of her mind watching the rest of her feeds had noticed something. This was not supposed to happen. She was in a deep focus meditation. Only something that could be an immediate personal threat could trigger a switch.

The image of a corridor filled her eyes. It was deserted except for a lone man, standing still, looking up into the eyes of her net-fly. Looking into her eyes. The man wore grey overalls marked with the numbers of the Iron Warriors labour cadres. His scalp was clean-shaven, his stare blank and unblinking. He smiled, lips moving as though pulled at the corners by wires. A swirl of colour tattoos bloomed on his face, and then faded as the smile slid down his face again.

‘Be careful, assassin,’ he said. ‘There are only so many places to hide, and what might appear safe, might be otherwise.’ He smiled again, reached up, and the image became static. She felt the net-fly die. Shock flooded her. It took several seconds for the conditioned routines to kick in.

Data: Net-fly presence compromised.

She performed a blink-fast inventory of her swarm and found all the rest in place and functioning.

Projection: Subject who made approach wished to invoke psychological intimidation.

She began to flick through the net-flies that watched over her boltholes within the Sightless Warren. After three she began to find the messages. Scratched, daubed or chalked within sight of her net-flies was a symbol: the first letter of the alphabet in a dialect of Old Terra, an Alpha.

She had to pause before she began to process these facts. She had kept subconscious watch on each of the bolthole locations that had been marked, and she had not seen anything.

Projection: The enemy is not trying to intimidate. The enemy is trying to communicate sophistication and superiority.

She was aware of her own breathing; aware of the narrowness of the vent she had folded into, aware of everything, and aware that she was shivering.

‘You are making an error.’ Iaeo started at the sound, and then realised she had spoken aloud.

No, no, not now, she thought, and suddenly her mind was tumbling out of her control. She had been warned about it, they all had. Even a Vanus mind could only take in so much data for so long before it began to clog, and misfire. Extended mission conditions, and overly complex problem spaces, could induce a chaotic state in which the mind walked down its own compulsive paths. Iaeo had been living within a supremely complex problem space for months.

‘Demand: List known psychological qualities of the Twentieth Legiones Astartes, designation Alpha.’

She was speaking out loud. She could not help it. The old face of her mentor was grinning at her from her memory, and she catapulted through a loop of question and response that she had not begun and could not stop.

‘Response: Known psychological qualities include superiority/inferiority complexes, sublimated into complex psychopathic behaviour requiring the acknowledgement of superiority by an enemy and/or ally.’

‘Demand: Project data of recent confrontation in line with this data, and previous mission data.’

‘Projection: The Alpha Legion know I am here. They want me to know who they are. They want me to know how good they are. They want me to know

before they kill me.’

The memory of her mentor’s cruel smile was there again, just inside her eyelids.

She was shaking, her contorted muscles aching. But her mind was clearing.

She was out of the fugue. Crucial time had passed, but she was still whole, still alive, still functioning.

She began to touch the strings of her computations again, tentatively at first, then hauling them back into her awareness. She had lost time, and time was a deadly factor in a problem space.

She looked again through her eyes, and blinked back to the net-flies following Argonis and Sota-Nul. They were moving to the lift. She was still uncertain exactly what Argonis’s discovery meant. The implications were vast in their potential, and the projected possibilities were equally vast. She needed time, and for that she needed to cut away the agency of some of the actors. She performed a quick mental check, assured herself that her action would not have fatal consequences, and decided to change what she was seeing.

Carefully she fed a message into the Iron Warriors security systems. It was a tiny thing, just a seed that would grow into something greater.

The first security alarms began to ring out three minutes later.

The greatest defence is being beyond the reach of your enemy. The loyalists had understood this ancient wisdom since the first reinforcements had come to Tallarn's aid. While hundreds of thousands of war machines rested in the vaults of buried shelters, as many remained in the void, kept in the bellies of warships and transports. The reasoning behind this was simple: strongholds could fall. The loss of the Sapphire City Shelter had proved that point beyond doubt, and when it had fallen the loyalists had lost tens of thousands of machines. Ground-based fortresses were also static. The dominance they exerted over the surrounding areas was a weakness. Forces bound to one location on one side of Tallarn could not easily be deployed to an engagement on the opposite side of the planet.

Forces held in ships were not so vulnerable. They could run beyond the reach of an attack, and could be deployed across the planet's surface. The ships might have to fight through enemy forces to reach Tallarn, but while they were there, the loyalists could never be defeated. It also meant that the full strength of the forces arrayed against Perturabo could never be brought to bear at once.

It was a trade: survival at the cost of strength on the ground. It had remained a central pillar of the loyalists strategy for months and it showed no sign of being overturned. For that to happen something fundamental would need to change.

NINE

Rachab
Unbroken
Ambush

War Anvil travelled north, leaving the fires of the dead as a smear of red light in the thickening fog. They travelled through days and nights without noticing the boundaries between each. The surviving crew of *War Anvil* woke. Sacha did not regain consciousness, and her body remained slumped over the gun breech.

The flats seemed to go on forever. Kord had a suspicion that Origo had made more than one navigation error. He did not say anything, nor did he blame the scout. How could he blame any of them any more? They saw no other living thing. From his position back in *War Anvil*'s turret, Kord watched the two green runes of his remaining command glide over a featureless plate of drying earth.

Sometimes the fog outside the hull thickened, sometimes it thinned to almost nothing and the light of sun, stars, or moon fell down on them. The wind brought dust as well, great rolling banks which enveloped them in seconds. The first time the dust had come, Kord had ordered a complete stop, and they had waited while the hull had whispered with the swishing voice of the dust. When the dust had cleared it left them half buried beneath a black glass sky. As Kord had looked towards the promise of distant mountains, a great light had risen into the dark, strobing between blue and white, before vanishing, and leaving glowing skeins of light that had scudded across the sky. Shornal had sworn that she had felt the earth shake through the hull. Kord had felt nothing.

They had pressed on after that, the two tanks heaving themselves free of their shrouds of dust, and the desolation of days that were nights, and nights that were days, took them again.

In the dark hours Kord would sit and think of the reason why he had begun this journey into folly. His thoughts circled the images of the burning tanks, and he heard again all the warnings that he had not listened to.

But even then the old thought surfaced. There had to be a reason: a reason why this had all happened, a reason why the present was as it was, a reason that explained it all. To admit anything else felt like a surrender.

Time became difficult to measure, even with the numbers clicking over on *War Anvil*'s auspex. It was not that they could not measure the passing of days, or weeks, but the information lacked meaning. Fuel, water, air and nutrient fluid,

and the status of the recycling systems became the true measure of everything, the slow countdown to nothing the only clock which mattered.

Then, with an abruptness of a gunshot, the journey ended.

The rocket exploded ten metres in front of *War Anvil*. Earth fountained up. *War Anvil* rolled on, the debris falling on its hull. The order to arm weapons began to form in his mouth, but he already knew they were dead. Saul and Kogetsu were in the side sponsons, but the main guns were cold and empty.

'*Multiple heat signatures,*' called Origo over the vox.

'Where the hell did they come from?' shouted Saul.

'I can't see them!' Kogetsu yelled.

'*I count six,*' said Origo. '*But their signal identifiers say they are–*'

'*Unknown units, halt now and power down,*' the voice cut across the vox. '*We have clear shots, and I will not warn you again before I fire.*'

Kord recognised something in its low tones, something that rolled cold down his spine. He cut the drive power, and *War Anvil* came to a juddering halt.

'Comply,' he said into the command vox. 'Stop and power down.'

'*We are still,*' said Origo a second later.

'This is Colonel Kord of the Tallarn Seventy-First, we have complied.' He took a breath and tried to make his voice reflect the title he had just invoked rather than the reality he felt. 'Now identify yourselves.'

'*Your weapons are still charged and ready, colonel. You have ten seconds to undo that.*'

'All weapons cold, now!' Kord roared.

'Colonel…' began Saul.

'Now!' Kord waited. He had not counted, but after what seemed like a long time, the cold voice growled across the vox again.

'*You will give reasons for your presence.*'

'Who are you?'

Kord closed his eyes and let out a breath.

'Colonel,' it was Shornal. 'Their identifier signals are green. They are with us.'

'Allies who open a conversation by shooting,' said Saul.

'Silence,' said Kord. They all caught the sharpness in his voice. A leaden silence waited for him as he opened his eyes.

'We are seeking sanctuary,' he said into the external vox. 'We have taken casualties, are undercrewed, underarmed and running low on water, food and air.'

'*You do not know where you are?*' asked the voice.

'Not precisely.' Kord let out a slow breath, considered not asking the question which had been rolling over in his mind ever since he had first heard the challenge come across the vox. 'What Legion are you from?'

A pause. A long ringing pause.

‘The Tenth.’

Tenth Legion, he thought, *one of the sons of the dead primarch, one of the Iron Hands.*

‘My name is Menoetius,’ said the Iron Hand, *‘and I give you greetings.’* As if to accompany the words a low dark metal shape slid into Kord’s field of view. It was a Predator, its oil-black lines rubbed with dust. Lascannons hung from its flanks. Kord recognised the focusing plates of a conversion beamer running down the barrel of its main gun. *‘You will follow,’* said Menoetius.

‘Where to?’

‘You have found what you seek, at least in part. You are come to the Rachab, colonel. You will have safety there. Though, if you will leave again is another question.’

He woke first to the memory of his father’s voice.

‘Do you know our creed?’ Perturabo had turned to look into the distance of the machine-filled cavern. Hrend had hesitated, the words coming in halting bites from his speaker grilles.

‘From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will. From will cometh faith. From faith cometh honour. From honour cometh iron.’

‘Those are the words, but what do they mean?’ asked Perturabo, his chin dipping into the collar of his armour, the skin of his face contracting around his stare.

‘That we never break.’

‘That we never break…’ The primarch nodded, and then looked back to Hrend. ‘But what if we have already broken?’

For a second he could not believe that he had heard those words. Then they began to seep in. They felt like poison. Perturabo watched Hrend, black eyes unblinking.

‘Master,’ Hrend began. ‘We–’

‘What if we were broken long ago? What if the choices we made, and the trust we gave made our iron rust, our strength weakness, our honour false? What do those words mean then?’

‘They become a lie,’ he said.

Perturabo nodded slowly.

‘They become a lie,’ echoed the primarch.

‘But we have never broken.’

‘Our word, our trust, our chains, our dreams…’ A flicker passed through the depths of his eyes. ‘Which of these remains unbroken?’

And Hrend woke a second time to the voices of his brothers.

‘He endures yet.’ The voice was Jarvak, hard-edged, neither pleased nor disappointed, a blunt statement stamping the truth on reality.

He lay beneath a ceiling of red and orange clouds. It was not a kind waking. There was pain, true pain crawling up his nerves from damaged systems, the sharp feeling of broken bones and seeping wounds. Both his machine frames and his true flesh were hurt. The sensations overlapped, contradicted, chimed against one another, pulling his existence between two realities.

Bit by bit his senses cleared. He became aware of the others, their presence blotches of signals and heat encircling him: four war machines and a single Dreadnought, all arranged in a circle with him at the centre. They had taken four casualties then: the three Predators, and one of his Dreadnought brothers. More important than this tally was what had survived: Spartan 4171 was still intact, as was the drill machine. They still had Hes-Thal. They still had a guide to lead them through the lost land.

He began to test his motive system, and then to stand. They were still in the valley. The fires had contracted back to individual wrecks, each one a white stain on his heat vision. He switched to standard sight. The image jumped, scattered into fragments, and then settled. The black bones of heat-distorted hulls flickered at the heart of the fires. His targeting array remained off-line, but he counted the fires with a glance. The count matched the enemy strength. No survivors. As it should be.

He turned where he stood, and looked at the surviving machines of the Cyllaros. None of them were unmarked by battle. Jarvak's Sicaran had been washed by flame, and soot skinned its hull. He noted Gortun's absence, and deduced that one of the heaps of wreckage must be his brother in iron. It was unfortunate, but merely one factor in their reduced strength. They would be low on ammunition, and this far from the Sightless Warren there was no way to resupply. No matter, they had to continue. He wondered if the other search groups sent by the primarch had begun to die like this, not in one moment, but eaten away bit by bit.

The Cyllaros waited, silent, measuring his strength, judging if he had weakened enough to let the damage drag him into failure.

'Navigator,' he said.

'I see and hear,' said Hes-Thal.

'Does the path lead as it did?'

'*The path leads where it has always led.'*

Hrend cut the vox without reply, and took a step forward, then another and another. Pain followed each movement, but he did not stumble. After three paces the pain was a simple fact. The rest of the war machines opened their circle, and followed him as he walked through the fires and towards the pass across the mountains.

The alarms began to shout as the platform rose up the shaft. Argonis snapped around to look at Sota-Nul.

‘What–’

‘Full security alert in progress. Cause unknown.’

‘We are blown.’

‘Possibly. That is not a certainty.’

The platform clanged to a halt. The strips illuminating the shaft cut out.

‘And now?’ growled Argonis, pulling back to a corner, gun up, head twisting to track entry points.

‘Our detection is looking more probable.’

Taldak stirred on the floor. Argonis glanced at him, and up at Prophesius. He began to form a command.

Hatches blew out in the shaft above. Smoke billowed in. Heavy figures dropped onto the platform. Argonis’s eyes lit with target markers. His finger held still on the trigger, will overriding instinct. Sota-Nul whirled, hissing, arcs of blue power spitting from her.

‘No!’ shouted Argonis.

The deck rang under the impact of armoured boots. He saw the shapes of slab shields and the smear of red light from the eyes behind them. A buzzing fizz filled the air, and Sota-Nul slammed to the floor, sparks and cords of electricity flickering over her as she tried to rise. Argonis recognised the sound and effect of a graviton gun. He did not lower his weapon, but he did not move either. At his back Prophesius was scratching out words on his tablet, but Argonis did not turn his gaze to see what the astropath was writing.

Armoured figures and a wall of shields surrounded him, the muzzles of the guns slotted through each held steady on his chest. Sudden silence filled the lift shaft, broken only by the buzz of active power armour. The low light and still clinging smoke hid the details of the encircling warriors, but the way they had moved and the details of their posture spoke to who and what they were; the elite shield troops of the Iron Warriors.

‘Lower the weapon, emissary,’ said a heavy voice from behind the ring of Iron Warriors. It was Volk. Argonis could hear the flatness in the words. Some called the Iron Warriors callous, and he supposed that from a point of view they were, but he had fought with them, and seen the root of that quality. It was not pride, or because of stunted self-worth, it was simply that they would not let anything stand between them and what they needed to do.

He lowered his weapon. The shield wall surged forward. They pulled the bolter from his hands, the sword from his waist, and the pistol from his thigh. Not once did he have space to move, and three guns covered him at all times: thorough, precise, just as you would expect from the IV Legion. Once they were done they

stepped back, so that Volk could step forward. He was helmed, but his hands were empty.

‘I am the emissary of your Warmaster,’ growled Argonis.

Volk just stared at him. Argonis fancied that there was more than anger in that stare. The Iron Warrior began to turn away.

‘What are the Black Oculus?’ called Argonis. Volk froze. ‘The unlogged missions to the surface, what are they looking for?’ Volk turned his glowing red gaze back. Behind him Sota-Nul twitched on the floor, limbs sparking as they tried to move. ‘You have hidden things from me. You have hidden them from the Warmaster. Why are you here, old friend?’

‘Take them,’ said Volk at last, and the ranks of Iron Warriors closed around Argonis like a fist.

The kill-team came for Iaeo three days after she watched the Iron Warriors take Argonis. She was in a sump shaft which ran between levels of the shelter, draining extraneous moisture down to filter tanks in the deep earth. As wide as two battle tanks, it was a black void of mould and damp, dank air. Access to the shaft was by heavy inspection hatches, which could only be reached by crawling through passages. Rusting metal cleats dotted the inside of the shaft. Iaeo hung from the side of the shaft from two of the cleats, muscles locked, the pain of the exertion deleted from her awareness. She had been hanging in the dark for two hours when the attack began.

The first sign of the attack was the sound of the photon flash grenade arming as it fell from above. She snapped her head up and around, in time for the world to become a blinding white. Her eyes responded an instant before her mind processed it. Her irises contracted to nothing, blanking out the blinding light. Even then a frozen ghost-scar hung on her retina.

Data: Photon flash, timed detonation to descent.

Her eyes opened to see five figures running down the sides of the shaft above her. Black rope lines trailed above them. Her recovering eyes caught the lines of hard, compact armour, vision visors and gun barrels.

She sprang from the wall. Something hit the rockcrete where her head had been. Dust and glittering metal globules scattered from the impact.

Data: Stalker-pattern rounds, secondary gas propellant, mercury-filled heads.

She hit the opposite wall of the shaft and kicked away. The armoured figures fired. The sound of their guns was a stuttered purr. She caught a projecting cleat, then flipped back over as rounds exploded in silver clouds around her. She could see the attackers clearly now. They were Space Marines, but their armour was the compact, unpowered armour used by Legion recon units. They fired without pause, driving her down, the beaters driving her towards the executioners. It was a clever tactic, well executed, and with gravity on its side.

She flipped from the wall and dropped into the darkness. Above her the five shooters cut their rope lines as one and dropped after her. Anti-grav units lit with a ringing hum. That was good, she had predicted correctly.

Air rushed past her, the dark beneath roaring as it came up to meet her. After a hundred metres she splayed her limbs. Membranes of synskin between her arms, body and legs caught the air, and she snapped to stillness. The lead warrior falling after her reacted too slowly. His bulk slammed into her but she was ready. Her limbs ripped around him. Her hand came up under his chin. The digi-needler spat a sliver up under his jaw. A spray of rounds burst silently in front of her. Above and around her the falling figures were cutting their fall, anti-grav fields hissing in the damp air.

Data: Recon configured troops of the Legiones Astartes commonly carry secondary armaments on the right thigh and/or holstered across the chest.

Her hand found the power knife strapped to the dead warrior. She activated it in the sheath and ripped it out and upwards, carving through armour, flesh and bone.

She jumped from the dead warrior a second before a stalker round hit where she had been. The round blew the back of his head out. The fizzing power blade in her right hand cast shadows around her as she fell. Below her she heard a sound like a sharp breath, and knew that she had been right again. A second team were waiting beneath her.

Data: Flamer unit ignition sound.

She dropped the grenades, and snapped her synskin membranes out again, tucked her knees and flipped over as the air caught her. Stalker rounds thudded after her. In her left hand she held a bandolier of grenades she had taken from the dead warrior. She had pulled the pins in timed sequence before she had jumped from the corpse. The warrior she had killed had carried four grenades: two photon flashes, two fragmentation charges. She dropped the two flashes and a single frag down the shaft. The other frag she had left on the corpse that was still spinning in slowed gravity above.

On cue the world flashed to white beneath her. A second later she heard the simultaneous roars of frag denotations above and below her. Shrapnel rang off the rockcrete walls. She heard the secondary thump of a flame fuel cell exploding, and the air around her became a sea of fire. The edge of the blast waves hit her from both sides. She really was falling now, uncontrolled, tumbling over as she tried to reason out which way was up.

Her brain did what it always did in times of extreme stress. It went cold.

On reflection, things had occurred within predicted parameters. The Alpha Legion attack had been superbly orchestrated. If she had not been waiting for it, it might have succeeded. For a second she wondered if it had been within

acceptable risk/reward parameters. Increased risk taking was another known consequence of prolonged, unbounded deployment. But it came back to the oldest of paradoxes: what other choice had she had?

The problem was information, or rather its lack. Iaeo's mind drank information and its thirst was never quenched. There was always more information to consume. Even confined to a featureless, white room – the textures of walls and the angles of surfaces could spawn endless datasets. One of the first stages of initiation in the Vanus Temple was to be drowned in data. Presented with an endless source of data, initiates would gorge themselves to the point of seizure. The lesson in that experience was about selection. Data on its own was just chaos without form. Selection and exclusion gave data shape, gave it use. Iaeo knew this, but her hunger was not just for *more* data, but for very specific information.

What were the Alpha Legion doing, and what did they know?

Those questions were now the unknown edges of her calculations. Without answers she could not extend her projections. Without answers she could not sense the potential of any of her actions.

She now knew something of what the Iron Warriors were doing and what they were hiding, but that data only became useful if she knew who else knew that secret.

So she had begun a separate operation to get an answer from the Alpha Legion, and she had used the only lure she could: herself.

She opened her eyes and found that the shaft above her was still alight. Liquid fire clung to the shaft walls. A second later the shaft walls disappeared, and she was falling towards a black mirror of water under the roof of a rock cavern. She cut her speed before she hit the water. As the water closed over her she heard the voices of the surviving members of the team sent to kill her.

'*She is still active.*'

'*Too much noise, we have to pull out, now.*'

Three of the kill-team had survived. An acceptable number, more than enough to carry the net-flies that already clung to them under the edges of armour, and in the folds of weapon pouches.

'*Send a signal, termination failed.*'

'*She is good,*' said one of them, a bitter edge of admiration in her voice.

'*Yes,*' said the other. '*Too good.*'

As she sank deeper into the sump water, Iaeo smiled.

Governor Militant Dellasarius died as the fire tide guttered in the skies of his world. He had been old before he had come to Tallarn, and had grown two decades older before the Iron Warriors killed the world that was his to protect. The Great Crusade had taken his strength, hollowing his cheeks, and pulling his liver-spotted skin tight over his skull. When he moved it was with the click of augmetic support, and he breathed with the hiss of pumps. In the moulded muscle of his armour he looked like a corpse left to shrivel and dry on the battlefield. He was not a kind man. The Great Crusade had not needed kind men. He was a warrior, and while the loyalists on Tallarn were a patchwork of factions and power, he was the keystone that held them together.

Perhaps it was because in the first months after the bombs fell he had spoken not of survival, but of striking back, of vengeance. Perhaps it was simply force of will. Perhaps it was because he was there, and people needed someone to follow. No matter the cause, he had become the father of the raiding war, and then the broker between the reinforcements that came later.

From the fortress of the Rachab, Dellasarius had pulled together the scattered regiments, households, maniples of Titans, and warbands of the Legiones Astartes and created forces that had marched together. His voice and gaze cowed generals, persuaded Legion captains and arch magi to put aside their vision of victory, and accept his. If he slept, none of his aides saw it. He haunted the Rachab's central strategium through every cycle of day and night. Data-slates, and scrolls of logistical reports and battle plans followed him in drifts.

Not all agreed with him. Many believed that his strategies would do nothing but bleed the loyalists of strength. There were even some who voiced that opinion, and some that argued it to his face. But that did not matter. What were a few rogue voices amongst so many that were happy to agree, or at least stay silent? None could doubt his conviction, and against the man that the Tallarn-born called 'Ishak-nul', their 'promise of vengeance', what could they do?

Everywhere he went a company of guards followed. All were Tallarn-born. All ordinary people before the death of their world had remade them. They watched their master, following him like tattered ghosts clad in patchwork colours of a dozen regimental fatigues, When asked why he favoured these ragged citizens-turned-soldiers, he replied that he owed them vengeance for their world, and that he trusted them to make sure that he lived to see that vengeance fulfilled.

On the morning before the Inferno Tide washed the skies he declared that he would journey south to the Crescent Shelter. He had made such journeys twice before, never announcing them until an hour before he would move. His Tallarn-

born company would go with him, their war machines bracketing his Baneblade. On each previous occasion he had arrived at his destination.

The true dawn was breaking over the mist-veiled land. The fire tide lingered as an oily tint to the light which streaked through the fog. Running in tight formation Dellasarius's convoy was moving at combat speed over a series of ridges to the north of the plains of Khedive. Just as the Governor Militant's Baneblade crested a rise the Vanquisher riding directly in front of it slowed suddenly, rotated its turret and fired a shell into the Baneblade. The distance was no more than forty metres, and the shell struck the Baneblade's belly armour just as it showed above the ridge line. The shell stabbed into the hull and hit the central ammo hoppers. The turret blew off. The Vanquisher lasted five more seconds before the guns of its comrades killed it in turn.

As the news passed through the loyalists, one question followed in its wake: how could this happen?

And the truth that settled in the growing panic was that no one knew.

TEN

Suspicion
Storm ghosts
Kill-space immersion

‘Why are you here?’

Kord kept his eyes steady on the questioner. She had identified herself as Brigadier-Elite Sussabarka, and the chromed pins of her uniform echoed that claim. Her face was as lean as it was hard, narrowing from cropped dark hair to a pointed chin, by way of dark eyes and a thin mouth. He had spent most of his life in and around the men and women who fought the Emperor’s wars and defended his conquests; he had seen officers, soldiers and warriors of every stripe, and felt he could judge the nature of another in a few minutes. It had not taken that long with Brigadier-Elite Sussabarka; he had her typed as soon as she had stepped through his cell door: hard, clever, not to be underestimated.

Kord let out a breath and brought his hands up to run them across his mouth. The chains rattled from the manacles circling his wrists. The cell was small, a single cot crammed into a box of rockcrete, and sealed behind a heavy plasteel door. It had been… he was not sure how long it had been since he had climbed from *War Anvil* to a waiting circle of gun muzzles. They had fed him and let him sleep before starting this; at least for that he was relieved if not grateful.

He looked up at the brigadier, whose eyes were steady on his face. Menoetius stood just behind her. The Iron Hand’s armour filled the cramped space with a buzz like active engines and electricity. He had said nothing since the pair had entered, but just watched and listened. Of the two Kord found the Space Marine’s silence and stillness by far the most disturbing. He looked back at Sussabarka.

‘We were attacked somewhere to the south. We lost most of our–’

‘I did not ask how you are here. I asked why.’

‘We were not an extended patrol.’

‘You are Colonel Silas Kord, commander of the reborn Seventy-First, latterly of the Seventy-First Tallarn?’ Her expression added the words ‘mongrel, and scrap regiment’ without her needing to say them. ‘Operating out of the Crescent Shelter complex?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Then why, colonel, are you nearly a thousand kilometres from the Crescent Shelter? And why were your units recorded as lost over eight weeks ago?’ She

said the words softly, stepping forward, so that she could lean down to speak to him close to his face. ‘The Tallarn Seventy-First was deployed on a standard extended sweep patrol. It should have been back under earth and all of its crew tucked up forty-eight hours later, but none of them came back. No signals received, nothing. Another patrol found the wreck of an Executioner from the Seventy-First a week later. I had to monopolise some of our very limited signal capacity to confirm this. So that leads us back to the question of why you are here.’

She kept her head close to him, as if waiting to catch a whisper. Kord said nothing for a moment. He remembered the *Crow Call* peeling away from them when he had given the choice of following, or returning to the shelter. So none of them lived, not even those who had refused to follow him. He refocused his thoughts on the present. The brigadier wanted answers. He could not fault that need, even if he did not like her. The truth, though, was something that he was sure would not help take the chains from his wrists.

‘We strayed off course, couldn’t find our way back. Then we got hit, and we headed here because we heard there was a shelter.’

‘A shelter?’ She stood up, the disbelief in her voice and on her face too sharp to be feigned. ‘You know what this is, don’t you?’ He shrugged, and glanced back at Menoetius. The Space Marine did not seem to respond. ‘It is the Rachab, the Buried Mountain, stronghold of the Governor Militant, and the last place that a missing unit from the surface should stumble over. If we lose this battle, this will be the last place to fall. Making sure of that is my duty. Six days ago the Governor Militant was assassinated out in the world above by people who were supposed to be above suspicion. So, you see, Colonel Kord,’ she crouched down, and leaned back in so that he could smell the recaff on her breath. ‘I do not like nomads stumbling onto our doorstep with lies on their tongues.’

‘We simply came for shelter.’

She smiled, a crooked slash of teeth under her gun-barrel eyes.

‘I spoke to a colonel on the Crescent Command Staff. A man called Fask. The only reason he could plausibly think for someone called Kord being this far off his mark was if he were chasing some theory about a ghost patrol and patterns of enemy action. He said that if that was what had brought Kord here and cost him all but two machines of his command, that it would be kind to shoot him now.’ She folded the smile back into a hard line. ‘But that is only if you are who you say you are, and not… something else. Either way I do not like your answers.’

Kord dipped his head, took a breath, and rubbed his thumbs against his eyelids. Coloured smudges bloomed in the brief blackness. When he looked up Sussabarka was looking down at him, expectation held in her stare.

‘We were attacked to the south…’ he said. The brigadier let out a sigh, and gave a small shake of her head then turned, and rapped on the door. It opened and Kord saw the guard standing on the other side of the threshold. The brigadier took a step through, turned and looked back at Kord.

‘I do not need to hear the truth, even if you decide to tell it to me,’ she said. ‘Whether you are a spy, or just a renegade, the answer will be the same. You will have time to think about that. All the time there is in fact.’ She stepped out of the cell. A moment later Menoetius followed. Just before the door sealed again, Kord saw the Iron Hand look back at him, a look that he could not begin to read in the flint-grey eyes.

‘Arm,’ he commanded.

The guns of the Cyllaros armed. Hrend felt it as soon as he said it, a hot blurred feeling spreading through him. For an eye-blink he thought he felt the rounds snap into breeches, and charges into focus chambers, in every weapon in every remaining machine. He tried to ignore the feeling. They spread out slowly. Hrend walked forward.

Sand and dust rattled against his iron skin. Above him the dust storm rose from the dun-coloured ground to the azure sky. Seen with clear sight it was a rolling cliff the colour of rust and snow. Flashes of lightning scored through its core. Hrend could feel the charge within it itching his sensors.

‘You see them?’ he asked.

‘*Yes,*’ Jarvak replied.

The dust and scoured rocks shifted like snow beneath his tread. The wind was rising. Snakes of dust were sliding across the ground. He kept his gaze on the storm wall. His weapons were ready. They had been ready from the moment he had seen the ghosts in the storm. At first he had thought they were simply shadows in the storm, scattered images created by the churning dust. Then one had briefly solidified into the shape of a tank, its silhouette swallowed as soon as it had appeared. Then he had seen more, each one a different size and in a different place, but every time he saw them they were closer.

‘*I have no sensor readings.*’

‘*We should fire.*’

‘Hold.’ He spoke the word as much for himself as the others. His world narrowed to the threat markers tracking the oncoming shapes. His weapon systems felt warm. He shifted. The fingers of his fists clacked shut and opened. He did not register the movement. The guns that were part of him were aching. ‘Hold,’ he said again.

‘*It could be an entire army group,*’ said a voice he could not identify. It did not matter. All that mattered was the building pain around the muzzles of his guns.

‘All the more reason not to shoot.’ That was Jarvak. At least he thought… He forced a thought to form in his mind.

‘Signal them,’ he growled.

‘Unknown units identify yourselves.’ The ghost shapes grew in the rolling wall of dust, shapes hardening into hulls of war machines, into gun barrels, and tracks.

‘Do we fire?’

‘Hold.’ The heat was bleeding through him.

‘Do we fire?’

Fire… Fire… Fire… The word echoed and rolled through him, like a drumbeat, like a heartbeat that had become his.

Fire…

The metal of his bones was aching. There was lightning under his skin. He was nothing. He was half a being, an empty skin hung like a banner in a dry wind.

Fire… We only live… in fire…

And above him a black sun hung in the half-dream of his thoughts, scattering light that cast no shadow. It grew, swelling, and bloating, and he had to fire, had to allow the shadow of destruction to become part of the world. The black sun swallowed him and he was…

Standing before the memory of Perturabo.

‘You will be given a… guide, to lead you, and your cadre will go with you, but you will be alone.’ The hard edge had returned to Perturabo’s voice, and his eyes had seemed to sink back into the stillness of his face. ‘There are eyes within our allies that watch us, and look for weakness in us. They are all around us, never blinking, never sleeping.’ The primarch turned and began to move away as one the Iron Circle moved to enclose him. ‘They cannot know of this. Even those that go with you should know only what they need. No other, even those within the Legion, may know what you do for me.’

‘I will find it, my master.’

‘Others looked. Others failed.’

‘I will not fail.’

‘Unknown units identify yourselves.’ Jarvak’s challenge rang across the vox. The image of his father was gone. The black sun was gone. He felt nothing, the embrace of his metal body cold without sensation. For an instant he felt loss. The dust wind was streaking past, swallowing the edges of everything in sight. The cliff-face of the storm was above, its crest flickering with dry lightning. The ghosts advancing with the storm were no longer ghosts, they were war machines of the Legiones Astartes. Three machines rolled forward as though riding with the wind, a Venator, a Sicaran and the slope-fronted slab of a Land Raider. Their armour was metallic blue, the edges of their armour plates rubbed to bright metal. Etched serpents reared across their plates. Numerals and archaic letters ran in neat

rows down white bands painted along their flanks. Hrend did not recognise the unit markings or even the organisational structure they conformed to. But he recognised who they were.

They were scions of the last born: Alpha Legion.

The three Alpha Legion vehicles halted. Hrend switched to infra-sight in time to see that their weapons were hot, held at full charge.

'*Harrow Group Arcadus, Twentieth Legion.*' The voice came over the vox, filled with a pop and snarl of distortion. '*We see you, brothers.*'

'*Signal identifiers confirm,*' said Jarvak. Hrend said nothing, watching as heat bled into the surrounding air from the Alpha Legion tanks. The wind gusted and the ochre swirl of dust enveloped them. The sky above was gone, and with it the sun.

'How are you here?' he asked at last.

'*May I not ask the same question first, ancient?*' came the reply, the voice smooth and confident.

'I am not of the ancients,' he replied.

'*My apologies. I am Thetacron. Who do I address?*'

'How are you here?' he repeated.

Hes-Thal's sight had guided them on through desolation after the battle of the pass. They had not seen even the signs of the dead for a very long time. In his sight the targeting runes blinked between red and amber above the three Alpha Legion machines, the words of Perturabo rising from memory.

There are eyes within our allies that watch us, and look for weakness in us. They are all around us, never blinking, never sleeping.

'*We hit an enemy patrol on the other side of this depression,*' said the voice which had named itself Thetacron. Casual arrogance dripped from his tones. '*We are moving back across towards a hold position.*'

'*You move with the storm?*' asked Jarvak.

'*We are the storm.*'

Hrend pivoted his head. Data from his sensors flickered as they tried to claw detail from the swirl of charged dust.

'You can navigate through it?'

'*Of course,*' Thetacron replied, paused, then carried on. '*From the damage I can see on your machines, you must have taken casualties. We also are below strength. Where are you bound?*'

A line of lightning cracked above them, turning the ochre swirl to sheet white.

Hrend could feel the tension in the situation itching against his instincts.

'South,' he said.

'*With the storm wind,*' said Thetacron. '*We share a path. We will join with you.*'

'*Master?*' Jarvak's voice cut through the vox, low, insistent.

‘If you wish to keep moving through the storm we can guide you.’

The moment lengthened, and the wind tugged sheets of dust across them.

‘That is acceptable,’ he said.

‘Master…’

‘Good,’ said Thetacron. *‘You are the greater strength, you have our command. Who is it that we have the honour of following?’*

‘I am Hrend,’ he said.

Argonis’s prison was a cube of plasteel, without seam or rivet. He had entered through a single door as thick as tank armour, and had heard a cascade of locks turn when it closed. Air seeped in and out from holes around the door no wider than a child’s finger. They had taken his armour, of course, and left him with a robe of grey fabric. Water and nutrition paste came through tubes mounted on the door, though he could have lived without both for many months. The door had remained shut since he had entered, and he had no reason to suppose that it would open again. They were watching him though. A pict-lens and sensor blister sat behind a crystal dome at the centre of the ceiling.

He supposed that this state of isolation might have caused panic, or the mind to begin to eat itself with uncontrolled emotion. For Argonis, his mind became focused, his emotions stilled.

The mysteries that had made him allowed no other response. He had failed, but while that weighed on his thoughts it was secondary. First and foremost he had to plan, had to find a way of turning this situation. That there was hope of doing so did not matter. Hope was one thing that he did not need to live.

They had not killed him. Deceiving the Warmaster was one thing, killing his emissary was another. The fact that they had resisted crossing that line implied that this was not treachery in the simple sense. If Perturabo had intended to move against Horus in the future, killing his representative would have been a simple thing. Holding him prisoner held more risk, but also opened the implication that Perturabo wanted to keep what he was doing secret from the Warmaster now. There were many possibilities as to why that might be, but one stood out more clearly than all the rest as Argonis considered them.

They have not succeeded in whatever their true purpose on Tallarn is, and if the Warmaster knew that purpose he might stop them before it was complete.

What that purpose was remained unknown, a shape suggested by the few details that Sota-Nul had told him before they were taken.

Black Oculus, ghost patrols, path seekers… the words resonated with implication but without clear conclusion. He thought of the words that Maloghurst had spoken to him before he had left the *Vengeful Spirit*.

Horus had not been present, but his throne with its empty chair had loomed in Argonis’s awareness as though his gene-father had been sitting there, silent, his

eyes turned away in reproach.

‘Find out what they are doing,’ Maloghurst had said, looking down at him from beside the empty throne.

‘Cannot we just ask?’ Argonis had kept his voice respectful, but he had pointedly not bowed his head to the Equerry. He might speak for the primarch, but he was not Horus, and Argonis had been one of Abaddon’s chieftains for more than enough time to find making obeisance to Maloghurst a line that he would not cross, even now.

‘We can ask, but there are answers and answers.’

‘The Lord of Iron has always been stalwart in his backing for the Warmaster.’

‘He has, but we live in times when presumption is as dangerous as cowardice.’ Maloghurst left the word hanging at the tail of his words. Argonis felt the muscles tick in his jaws. ‘Besides, this engagement of his is sucking in and spending forces at a rate which must be justified. It is a hungry battle he is fighting, and we are fighting a war in which we cannot let such strength be spent blindly.’

‘What do you suspect?’

‘Suspect?’ A rattling smile had been in that word. ‘I suspect nothing. I fear everything. That is my great virtue. Find out what they are doing there, and why.’

‘If the reason is simple?’

‘Then impress on them that this battle cannot last for all time.’

Argonis had wanted to shake his head. It was not that he was being sent on a mission that was so clearly a punishment concealed in an honour, it was that it felt dirty, tainted by subterfuge. After all that had happened, all the bonds of brotherhood severed, and the blood on all their hands, such a sense perhaps should not have mattered to him. It did matter to him, though. It mattered a great deal.

Maloghurst had watched him with wet, pale eyes while the instincts of honour and obedience warred behind Argonis’s face.

‘This is the Warmaster’s will?’ he asked at last.

‘To the letter and word.’

‘And if there is… something else, some reason that is not simple*?’*

‘Bring them to heel,’ said Maloghurst.

Argonis had been able to hide the disbelief on his face. How was he supposed to bring a system-killing force, led by a primarch, to heel?

Maloghurst had heard both the disbelief and the question in Argonis’s silence, and his eyes had sparkled cold, as he raised a hand and a pair of figures had drifted from the shadows. They had come to a halt beside Maloghurst: a black-robed spectre, and a green-robed man with a head locked in iron. Maloghurst had raised his other hand. Between his armoured fingers he held a key with twisted teeth.

‘You will not go alone,’ he had said.

Argonis thought of the key, taken along with his weapons and armour. Sota-Nul and Prophesius too, taken and imprisoned, or so he presumed. He would need them both, if he was to complete the mission his primarch had given him. It was not in his nature to accept the possibility of failure, but as the time had passed in the cell he had felt its presence growing in his awareness.

‘This is a chance, Argonis,’ Maloghurst had said, as he had handed him the standard of the Eye of Horus. ‘A chance for forgiveness, or oblivion. Which will it be?’

Iaeo blinked. It was the closest she came to rest now.

Rest, what even was that? She had suppressed so many of the physical elements of severe fatigue that both exhaustion and rest existed only as concepts, terms to apply or not. She was fairly sure that the taste of blood in her mouth related to the presence of one, and the absence of the other, but she was not going to examine that data.

She could not rest, not now. She barely moved except to shift location, and she had taken the risk of not doing that several times now. There was just too much to process, too many lines of manipulation, of observed effect, and recalculation. She could not step away from it for even a second.

Half of the battle-scape of Tallarn breathed in and out of her subconscious. She had taps into the Iron Warriors communications, into the Alpha Legion’s communications, she saw her enemies and they did not see her. She had even re-tasked a portion of the Iron Warriors communication system to leech data and signals from the loyalists. It was the finest data harvest she had created. With a blink she could see the operative called Jalen, with another blink she could read the reports of Jalen’s operatives. There were holes, true, but what was art without imperfection? She had heard that once she was sure, but she could not remember where. She had suppressed a lot of extraneous memories recently. It did not matter, the point still stood.

It was beautiful. A few simple bare facts. A mission sent here, a location signal there, a report here, all circling ignorance like water draining into a hole. Fear, and defiance, and hope. People were supposed to be unpredictable, but they were not, they really were not. If you could see what they knew, their responses became like the directions of ships under sail.

Something wet rolled down from her nose in the physical world she was ignoring. It touched her lips. It tasted the same as the blood already in her mouth.

She had been wrong. Not wrong in her calculations, but wrong in her mission objective. It had been too narrow, too direct, too tame. The possibility she had sensed when Argonis and his witch discovered the Black Oculus Navigators was

no longer a possibility. It was the primary target, and it was achievable, the calculations confirmed it.

She wondered if any being on the system knew the truth, besides her. Perturabo of course, but even he did not see as she did. Not now. This was her battle now. Her song.

She narrowed her awareness, focusing down on a few spurs of possibility. It just needed a shift, a little panic, a little desperation.

And there, shining like a silver fish cutting through dark water, was a beginning.

It was a simple signal. The layers of ciphers encoding it had baffled the Iron Warriors, but Iaeo had broken it by simply taking the key encoding from the Alpha Legion.

'Iron Warriors sweep force under command of Hrend moving north towards Media Depression.' A location code was embedded with the words.

She smiled, and the movement nudged a bead of still-liquid blood onto her tongue. The signal had yet to reach the Alpha Legion, and now it never would. She formed the signal which would, slowly taking her time over each phrase.

'*Iron Warriors sweep force under command of Hrend lost. Advise use of Imperial assets to intercept. Strong indications that they are closing the artefact. Advise use of all means to isolate and terminate this force.'*

She paused after she composed the signal. It would be the last to come from the force trailing Hrend and his machines. Even if they sent more they would never be heard. This was it, their last word.

She nodded to herself, and loosed the signal. She would have to shift location soon. She could see Jalen now, could predict him and his attempts to shut her down, but part of her still remembered that she needed to be alive to function. She would move, she would, but not yet. She wanted to watch for a little longer.

PART THREE
TERMINATION

Discord and desperation almost ended the Battle of Tallarn. The Governor Militant's death cracked the old fractures in the loyalists wide. Though Dellasarius had not been their leader he had been a pivot around which the battle moved, a stone that even the wildest currents of dissent had to flow around. Now he was gone, and every officer, hetman, demi-admiral, commander and captain saw the future differently. Some wanted to withdraw forces from the planet entirely, and make the battle one fought in the void alone. Others wanted to attack the Sightless Warren immediately, others argued for a return to the hit-and-run tactics of the battle's early phases.

The leaders of some factions did not even venture an opinion on a combined strategy. They simply began to take action. Myrmidax Kravitas Beta-Prime left the surface, their landing craft swarming up into the high atmosphere to create footholds in the charred remains of dead ships and gutted weapon platforms. A ragged company of war machines took to the world above, and began attacking any other machines they came across. Mesucon, Siridar Count of House Megron, formed a banner of fifteen Knights and struck to the southern polar marches in search of enemies. And more went their own ways, either to a battlefield of their own making, or to a grave made by their wilfulness. And the arguments raged on, echoing in the command chambers of the fortress shelters and across the vox connecting them. For some the conviction that they were right drove them to argue, for others the fears inside led them to see death and failure in every alternative put in front of them.

One man ended the discord. He was called Gorn. He had come to Tallarn with the rank of general, but for years had nothing to command. Caught on Tallarn when Horus's rebellion ignited he had waited as the war ignored him. Then the Iron Warriors had come and given him a war. In the days which followed the bombardment Gorn had been amongst the first to contact other shelters, and to begin to coordinate a response. His name was known by all, as was his reputation. A hard man, they said. Hard to like, and harder not to respect. He had taken to the surface thirty times, returning each time with at least one personal machine kill. A breech failure in one of those sorties had gouged scars across his jaw and down his neck. He had said nothing throughout the long hours of argument. The best accounts agree that he broke that silence with three words.

'Horus will win.'

At first few heard him, and those that did discarded his words. Later, there would be as many different accounts of what happened next as there were war

machines on Tallarn. A few say he drew his weapon. Some even say he killed the next three people who spoke.

‘Horus will win,’ he shouted.

Silence echoed after those words and, after a lone minute of shock, he spoke into that silence.

‘We will fail. Tallarn will fall. Traitors and rebels will pour through this gate to Terra, and Horus will win this war. He will win, and his victory will begin because here, on this world, we failed. That is certainty. That is undoubtable truth. If we allow it to be. We end this here. We have that power, we simply have lacked the will.’

When challenged on how victory could now be achieved, Gorn is said to have pointed up to the shelter’s ceiling and beyond that to the sky of the land above.

‘The heavens are clear. We bring all of our strength to the surface, all of it, no matter the cost. We drown this world in iron. We force the Lord of Iron to meet us up there in the open.’

‘Why would he do such a thing?’ a voice asked

‘Because once he sees what we are doing he will see a chance to break us utterly. He will see a chance for victory, and a chance of defeat if he does not.’

Objections came, declarations of madness, of foolish bravado, of the logistical elements which would mean that armies of that size could not be controlled effectively, how there would not be enough supplies to keep them in the field for more than a few days… and the muttered dismissals and words of disbelief swelled.

Then one voice asked a different question.

‘Where?’ asked someone. ‘Where would you make this battle?’

And, as though they had suddenly been captivated by the dream of an end, the commanders of Tallarn waited for Gorn to answer.

Gorn indicated the great flat expanse at the heart of Tallarn’s northern continent.

‘Khedive,’ he said. ‘On the plains of Khedive.’

ELEVEN

Belief
Cthonian truth
Error

The time passed in the dimming and brightening of the cell's only light. Kord slept, and ate, and let his dreams take him. He saw Jurn again, saw the hinterlands around the coast cities, the fields waving in the summer wind. He saw old friends, and heard old words of hurt and love that he had forgotten. He saw his father, gone to the dirt long before Kord had taken the silk ribbons of service and gone to be a soldier. And when he woke the dreams clung to his thoughts like words blown into the present from the past. He began to live for the dreams, but to dread the waking. He counted each time he slept until the numbers frayed in his mind, and the point seemed to be lost. He wondered what had become of the rest of his crew, if they too turned through the circle of sleep and waking just as he did. He wondered what future he had led them to.

Then, in a gap between dreaming, the door to the cell opened. Kord looked up expecting to see a guard. The face of a demi-god looked back at him. Menoetius stepped through the door, and it locked behind him.

'I wish to speak to you,' said the Iron Hand.

'Then speak,' replied Kord, not breaking eye contact, not showing fear, even though it was crawling through his guts.

'You have met our kind before.'

'Yes, I fought on Oscanis with some of your kin.'

'I have not heard of that war.'

'Most wars are unknown to someone.'

'Why were you out on the world above? I ask this, not the Brigadier-Elite.'

'But you are here by her authority.'

'By my own.'

'She commands here though?'

'If you have seen us in war you know that we are our own authority.'

'I have, and I know that warriors of the Tenth Legion rarely ask questions to learn answers.'

'Then why do we ask questions?'

'To confirm knowledge.'

Menoetius nodded slowly.

‘You were following an Iron Warriors formation across the edge of the Khedive. The enemy was light strength, alone, and without deep support. A hunter patrol your commanders call them. But they were not hunters. They were something else.’

‘Seekers.’

‘That is what you believe?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Do you remember where you were born, Menoetius?’ Kord thought he saw the shadow of a frown on the Iron Hands Commander’s face. ‘I do. I remember the house where I grew up. I remember the smell of the food my grandfather cooked. I remember the red and blue cups I played with before I could speak. I remember leaving it. I remember the doors of the landing craft closing on the light of my last morning. I remember realising that everything I had known would only be a memory from then on. I knew what I was doing. I knew that I would not go back. It was a choice. A sacrifice.’

‘You believed in something greater.’ Menoetius nodded.

‘I believed that I could be part of something greater, that what I would do, and everything that would happen, mattered… That everything has a purpose.’

‘And you still believe that?’

‘Yes,’ said Kord. ‘I still believe that there is a reason for everything even if we cannot see it. I have to believe that.’

‘Why?’

‘Otherwise there is nothing but chance laughing at us.’

‘You killed those under your command,’ said Menoetius, his voice the flat hammer of stated truth. ‘You allowed what you believe to draw you on, and if you felt any doubts, you put them aside, and so you led them to death.’

Kord felt the muscle harden in his jaw, the heavy warmth as blood flushed to his muscles. He returned the stare.

‘Yes,’ he replied.

Menoetius nodded, and something in the grey skin of his face changed. Kord had the strange feeling that the Iron Hand Commander’s had just passed some kind of judgement.

‘But you do not ask for forgiveness. You do not think you were wrong?

Kord dropped his gaze for the first time. He thought of the ambush, of the sound of shrapnel ringing from *War Anvil*’s hull. He thought of Augustus Fask’s red, fat face.

‘No,’ he said at last, looking back at Menoetius. ‘No I was, and am, right. There is a reason all this is happening, and no one wants to see it.’

Menoetius blinked, slowly, and then nodded again.

‘Those that followed you died because of failures. Some of those failures are yours, some of them their own. Life exists because of strength, the strength to move from the present into the future. Life ends when strength fails. You did what you knew you had to. You followed what you knew was right. They failed as much as you. Their death does not make what you believe false.’

Kord did not know what to say. It was the most he had ever heard an Iron Hand legionary say. There was something else as well, a feeling that Menoetius was not talking about him at all.

‘How did you come here, Menoetius?’ He was not sure why he asked, just that it was the right question to ask.

‘From Isstvan.’

Kord nodded.

‘Thank you for the conversation.’

Menoetius frowned for the first time. ‘This was not a conversation. I simply wished you to understand what will happen now.’

He stood, and turned for the door. Kord did not move. Menoetius knocked on the door and it opened. He looked back at Kord.

‘Come with me.’

Kord hesitated, and then rose and stepped towards the door. He could see the guard on the other side of the open door, his hand hesitating as it reached for his weapon. Menoetius’s hand barely seemed to move. Stillness filled the outer chamber.

‘This is not your duty,’ said the Iron Hand Commander to the guard, his voice low. Kord felt the instinct to run shiver down his limbs. ‘This man passes from here as I pass. Do you understand?’ The guard nodded slowly. ‘You will comply.’ The guard nodded again. Menoetius let his hand drop from where it had rested on the man’s arm. He turned away and walked from the chamber into the corridor beyond. After a second Kord followed. When he glanced back he saw that the guard was still shaking.

‘Where are you taking me?’ he asked. Menoetius growled, or perhaps it was a low laugh.

‘To find the truth,’ he said.

Hrend walked with the storm. Around him the Iron Warriors and Alpha Legion machines kept in close formation. The rattle of dust stole the sound of tracks and engines. Within the storm there was no day, no night, just the crackle of signals holding them together as they pushed on. Questions walked with Hrend, voices that asked him what he was doing, and all the while the call of the black sun rose and fell in him like a tide.

Thetacron and the other Alpha Legion machines said next to nothing. Once they had advised Hrend to call a halt in the lee of a crag of rock, saying that the

storm would not let them continue for now. Hrend had agreed, and they had clustered together, a string of wind-scoured iron and azure blue. An hour later the dust gloom had become a strobing cauldron of lightning. Great dry booms of thunder shook the ground and air. It had lasted for a full day, and even when it had passed the storm remained. Hrend imagined the storm front circling the land, gathering dust and strength like a serpent eating its own tail. Once the lightning tide passed they had carried on, pressing on in silence through a never-ending veil.

With every step the black sun seemed closer. He did not sleep any more, but the dreams chased him without pause. He dreamed of Olympia. He dreamed of the world within the Eye of Terror. He dreamed of burning, of his flesh becoming slime inside his armour. He should have died then. He should have died again, up in the valley beneath the pass, with the snow of a dead world as his shroud. Yet he lived, and tried not to think how the damage to his frame had seemed to heal like flesh, how he could sometimes feel the wind blow over him, even though his skin was nothing but plasteel and ceramite. He thought he could hear laughter in the rattle of dust against metal.

When the first men had brought iron from the fire, and put an edge to the first blade, they had created this strength. And it was a strength that could not exist without its twin. What was a blade without the blood it drew? What was armour without the blow that rang upon it? They were strong, and he was strong, and that strength would not be allowed to fail. It would live as only iron could live: in blood.

‘*Master,’* Jarvak broke his thoughts. *‘The Navigator has–’*

‘Change the frequency,’ growled Hrend. Just beside him, close enough to touch, the serpent-etched hull of the Alpha Legion Land Raider kept pace with him. The vox rattled as it jumped between channels.

‘The Navigator has begun to speak.’

‘He has spoken before.’

‘*He speaks without pause.’*

‘What is he saying?’

‘*He says the gate of the gods draws near.’* Hrend felt cold flicker through limbs he no longer had. *‘He says that the black sun rises.’*

‘We follow where he leads,’ said Hrend.

‘*What of our… allies?’*

‘They must know nothing.’

Beside him the Alpha Legion machines swept on in silence.

The lights in Argonis’s cell cut out. The spiral of thoughts in his head vanished. He came to full readiness, muscles poised, every sense open. For a handful of seconds there was silence. Then he heard a sound, low, vibrating from far away

even before it passed through the steel and into his skull. The sound grew louder and louder, and went silent. He heard feet clang on metal flooring, just outside. Then something heavy fell against the door, and rattled down its surface. He yanked himself back into the cell as the locks within the door clattered open, and it swung outwards.

He was ready, crouched low on the floor below the eyeline of someone standing in the doorway.

‘Come with me, emissary,’ said Jalen. ‘There is not much time.’

Argonis lifted Jalen from his feet, and slammed him into the door frame. The human gagged, hands rising on instinct to the fingers around his throat.

‘Be still,’ growled Argonis, as he glanced into the corridor beyond. An Iron Warrior lay beneath the door, hands still gripping a boltgun. Smoke filled the space beyond, coiling in the silent flashes of alert lights. He reached down, and pulled the bolter from the Iron Warrior’s grip. He took a slow breath. The scent and taste of the air spoke of weapon fire, of melta-charge detonations and overloaded wiring. There was something else too, a tingle of sweet sugar scent on the edge of his senses. He looked down at the supine Iron Warrior, and at the man pinned by his hand to the wall. Jalen looked back at him, his eyes cold and without fear.

‘One twitch of witchcraft, and you die,’ he said.

‘Why would I do that, when I have gone to such trouble to free you? And what makes you think I did all this alone?’

An armoured figure stepped out of the smoke haze. He wore metallic blue battleplate and had a volkite charger levelled at Argonis. His eyes were cold green lenses in a beaked helm. He looked relaxed, as though he had just wandered onto the scene, as if he were almost bored by it. Argonis had seen that air before, and knew that to consider it weakness would be a fatal mistake.

Argonis nodded. The blue-armoured warrior did not shift his aim. Argonis let go of Jalen. There was nothing else to do. For the next few minutes he did not care why the Alpha Legion was here. All that mattered was getting clear of the cell. A strict hierarchy of needs applied to his next actions. He had a weapon, but he needed armour, his own by preference, then he needed the tech-witch, and most importantly he needed Prophesius. After that he would find a way to Perturabo.

‘The others?’ snapped Argonis.

‘Down the passage, fifty metres left, then twenty metres right. Doors should release but only for the next four minutes. Route was clear as of sixty-one seconds ago.’

Argonis folded out of the door, and began to move down the smoke-filled corridor, keeping low and hugging the walls. Jalen and the Alpha Legion warrior

followed, their movements fast and fluid.

He reached Sota-Nul's cell first, and pulled open the door. The figure he saw sketched in the silent pulse of the alert lights was a floating ball of coiled metal limbs and chromed snakes. A pair of what might have been atrophied legs was tucked up against her torso like the bone and skin limbs of a stillborn chick. A blister of optic lenses protruded from the top of the mass. Red light glowed in her many eyes. Chains of lightning held her in place above a humming box of black metal.

He looked at the machine and put three bolt rounds into it. The lightning chains collapsed as the box exploded. Sota-Nul began to fall, and then halted in mid-air. Flesh-metal tentacles unfolded around her.

Argonis turned away.

'Follow,' he said, and began to move again.

Prophesius was unchained in a bare cell, the thrumming dome of a null field above him. Argonis shot out the field projector and the null dome vanished into ozone and smoke. Jalen flinched as the masked astropath stepped forward.

Argonis turned to Jalen.

'Equipment,' he said.

'Fifteen metres left, there is a cache. The door is disabled.' He paused, licked his lips, and a tendril of tattooed scales formed at the corner of his mouth. 'You need to move fast, emissary.'

'What is your plan from here?'

'If you intend to reach Perturabo, you need to get to the *Sickle Blade*. It will be fuelled and prepared for launch.'

'Just like that?'

'A great deal has gone into this operation since you summoned me.'

Argonis's gaze hardened.

'I did not summon you.'

Jalen's face had gone still, his eyes flickering over Argonis's face.

'The signal came through with the activation ciphers given to Horus, and from Horus to you.'

'One of us is lying, and what reason would I have to lie?'

Argonis heard the microscopic noise as the Alpha Legion warrior behind him shifted.

'No,' said Jalen shaking his head. 'There is another possibility…'

'Another possibility?' said Argonis carefully. His bolter was still in his hand, held low at his side. 'What other possibility could there be?'

Argonis turned. The movement was casual, as though he were looking around at the others in the room.

He fired his gun into the thigh of the warrior behind him as he turned. The warrior slammed back, leg armour shattering. Argonis grabbed him as he fell and hugged his head into the boltgun's muzzle. The burst of rounds sawed into the legionnaire's faceplate and tore his head apart. Argonis dropped the corpse, turned, and brought his gun up. Genuine shock split Jalen's face. Clusters of malformed tattoo patterns bloomed and withered there.

'Prophesius,' he said quietly, and the astropath stepped closer. The air took on a storm-pressure edge. Jalen's normally calm eyes flicked up to Prophesius's iron face.

'You lied to us,' said Argonis. 'You lied to us from the start. You have been here since the Iron Warriors were here, amongst them, watching them, leeching secrets. You knew what was happening on this world. Lies layered under lies. How could you be what you are, and not?'

'I…' began Jalen.

'And why did you free us? What are we, a weapon to be used now because something has gone wrong?'

'You sent a signal…'

'Black Oculus, tell me what you know of that.'

'We…' the man was fighting to keep calm. Argonis could feel Prophesius's presence at his shoulder, hot and sharp against his skin. He could see the astropath's iron mask reflected in Jalen's eyes.

'Prophesius,' Argonis said carefully. 'Take it from him.'

The astropath extended a hand, green silk falling back from skeletal fingers tipped with the silver stylus spikes. Frost flashed up Argonis's arm from where he held Jalen's neck. He felt a stab of pain, in his mind. But he was ready for it, and it was weak.

Prophesius's fingers were extending slowly towards Jalen's open eyes.

'You have to stop them,' hissed Jalen. 'They almost have it. We cannot stop them, not now.'

The tips of Prophesius's fingers were a hair's-width from the smooth surface above Jalen's pupil.

'What is this battle for? What are they here for? Why are you here?'

'For a weapon, a weapon of primordial destruction.' Jalen nodded carefully. 'A weapon left here when there were still gods to war in the heavens. That is why my masters came here, and why Perturabo is here now.'

'If you say you were doing this for the Warmaster, I will watch as your eyes are pulled out.'

'We serve Alpharius, and Alpharius is loyal.'

Argonis looked at the man for a long moment then nodded slowly.

'So you *were* lying from the start,' said Argonis.

Argonis brought his boltgun up and fired: one round into each of the eyes, one into the heart.

He paused, looking down at the scattered meat and red liquid which had been the man. After a second he turned away, wiped the blood from his face.

‘An unexpected tactical choice,’ hissed Sota-Nul.

‘If the liar has no tongue then he will tell no more lies.’

‘An aphorism I am not familiar with.’

‘It is from Cthonia.’

Argonis stepped to the door. If Jalen had not lied about the immediate situation then they now had less than two minutes before the Iron Warriors began to respond to the breakout. He began to run; he needed to reach his armour, and then they needed to get out.

‘What is your intention?’ asked Sota-Nul.

‘We are going to follow Jalen’s plan. We are going to get to the Lord of Iron, and we are going to do the Warmaster’s will. We are going to call him to heel.’

Iaeo watched Jalen die, and shifted a set of variables to fixed values. She felt her face twitch. She was smiling. A sign of pleasure, but she was not conscious of why. Strange, very strange… The operative’s death had been almost certain given Argonis’s personality structure and the information available to him. He had time to piece together a few basic strings of logic. The Alpha Legion was here, they were concerned with the discovery of secrets, and now they had freed him. He knew that they knew more than they had told him. The response from a warrior conditioned, trained and seasoned in the Sons of Horus was obvious.

She replayed a recording of the execution. Fast and brutal, a killing straight from the gang warrens of Cthonia. The tri-shot obliteration technique was interesting. The descriptions she had read had not conveyed the speed, or mess. Yes, mess, that was the correct phrase. Brain, and blood, and bone, all sprayed across the walls, floor and ceiling. For his part, Jalen had also had little choice. The Alpha Legion had spent a long time trying to contain the Iron Warriors activities on Tallarn, and now he believed that they were about to achieve their true goal. The escalating battle on the plains of Khedive was significant, but to Jalen it was a side show; he believed that they were about to lose a prize they had worked for years to secure. So he had freed Argonis and told him part of the truth in the hope that Argonis would find a way to shut the Iron Warriors down.

Desperation. Such a clean tool when applied. Now she just needed to make sure that…

Something twitched at the edge of her awareness. Her first instinct was to override it. She had been deep in the data/problem/kill-space for a long time now, and had blocked out all but the most basic awareness of her body and environment.

She flicked between net-fly views covering her hiding place. Nothing. There was nothing there.

She went back to the flow of projections.

Stinging cold enveloped her. Needles of pain stabbed into her skull. She felt her teeth clamp together, tasted blood as she bit her tongue. She tried to move, but her limbs were cold and cramped, and invisible fingers of ice were holding her still. A wall of displaced air slammed into her. The duct she was curled in came apart. She fell, limbs still locked in a ball, and hit a metal grate ten metres below her. Bones broke in her back, legs and arms. Her mind fought to divide what was going on into data, and failed. The pain was profound, stronger even than her modified body could cope with, too strong to ignore.

A boot lashed into the base of her back, and she felt something rupture. Hands ripped the digi-needlers from her fingers. The joints popped and detonated fresh pain in her arms.

Data: Enemy has knowledge of–

Another kick, this time across her face, ripping the visor from her eyes. Her data projections and thought lines were falling apart, replaced by a vivid awareness that she was bleeding inside, that she could feel splinters of bone in her muscles.

‘Come now,’ said a smooth and reasonable voice. ‘This is just the way this meeting must be, mamzel. You are very capable, and that ability demands respect. See what you are experiencing now as our mark of respect.’ She heard steps moving towards her. The metal grating she was lying on shook slightly with each footfall. There was another sound nearby: the soft inhalation/exhalation cycle of one… no, two other people. Hands touched her face. She tried to snap her arms up, to grab, to strike. She could not. Her limbs simply would not move. The fingers felt warm, the tips smooth as they prised her eyelids open.

Light flooded her eyes. She looked up. Huge turbines turned far above. Ducts criss-crossed the air in between. A ragged hole split the underside of a duct ten metres above where she lay. She recognised the effect of adhesive-tipped krak grenades. Beneath her a gantry of gridded metal spanned a rockcrete crevasse. Blackness hid the bottom of the drop. A face moved into view. It was not a smiling face, nor a cruel one, but it was the last face she had expected to see again.

‘I know you did not kill him, but I have a suspicion that I should thank you for the death of my brother,’ said Jalen.

Only later would it be called a battle. The need of history to codify, divide and label would eventually mark the start of the Battle of Khedive as beginning two hours before dawn broke over the storm-lashed basin. It would say that its first shots were the torpedoes fired from loyalist Strike Force Indomitable. *Seen in the cold light of retrospect that moment is as suitable a beginning as any other.*

It began, like so many offensives before it, in the heavens. The Inferno Tide had scoured the lower orbits of Tallarn of ships and defences, but in the high spheres the Iron Warriors still held sway. A circlet of weapon platforms and warships had been set above the Sightless Warren since its creation, guarding its approaches from the void, and watching over the approaches to its northern hemisphere. The Iron Warriors, never needing to set war to poetry, called this cluster Outer Defence 1.

A spill of torpedoes converged on the clustered Iron Warriors ships and stations. Most had been shot days before by ships far from Tallarn's orbits. Their rockets set on delayed triggers, and they had glided close to their targets on momentum alone. By the time their engines lit, it was too late for the Iron Warriors to destroy them. Building-sized munitions slid through void shields, struck armour, and detonated. Explosives, melta-cores, graviton generators, plasma charges and quake warheads strung the sky with fresh stars. The Iron Warriors frigate Blood Tempered *died as a string of five torpedoes caught it in a perfect line across its back. The debris and force of its death blew the shields off its sister ships in a flickered blink of white light.*

Strike Force Indomitable *emerged, gliding along high orbits from behind the face of Tallarn. Twelve warships came in the first wave. They were not the heaviest ships the loyalists had in the system, but they were the fastest and most heavily armed. They had a single task: to kick open the door to the planet's northern hemisphere. They began to fire as soon as the first torpedoes found their marks.*

Beams of las-fire laced the dark. Rushes of plasma formed comets as they boiled across the black gulf. Walls of shellfire spat from vast gun mouths. Kaleidoscope light boiled through the Iron Warriors ships. High orbital platforms split, burned, and began to tumble down the hungering gravity well into Tallarn's embrace. As the first signals shouted from the dying and dead ships, the Iron Warriors ships in the rest of the system moved to respond. Squadrons scattered around the moons of Tallarn turned their prows towards the battle-sphere and burned their engines white.

Strike Force Indomitable *cut their fire and thrust forwards into the sphere of ruin they had created. They lost three ships in the first moments, split open by guns of the surviving Iron Warriors defences. The rest kept on, dumping macro-cannon fire into every target they could see. Half remained on the thinner edge of space and ripped into the remaining Iron Warrior defences. The second half settled deeper into low orbit, and began to roll fire down onto surface targets. Each captain on each ship knew that a counter-attack would come, that the might of the Iron Warriors would descend to close the sky above the Khedive. That fact was irrelevant, though. They had bought the time they needed.*

TWELVE

Vortex
Treachery
Second head of the Hydra

‘You cannot do this.’ Brigadier-Elite Sussabarka stood across the door to the muster chamber. A squadron of ten soldiers in crimson-and-grey carapace stood at her side. Kord noticed that they had not raised or pointed their cable-fed lasguns, but he could read the poised readiness in their stances. They were steady, professional, willing to stand with their commander as she stood in the path of a warrior of the Legiones Astartes. They were also intelligent enough not to point a weapon at the Iron Hands legionary.

Menoetius stared at Sussabarka without moving. After a handful of seconds his stillness seemed to seep into the air. Even to Kord it felt like a threat. Sussabarka shifted but did not step back. Her face was a mask, her jaw and gaze set. Kord felt a twinge of admiration in the same instant that he dismissed her defiance as foolish; she would get herself killed if she held strong.

At least that would get her out of the way.

‘Stand aside,’ said Menoetius, his voice low, like the purr of a vast engine turning over. Kord glanced up at Menoetius. The hum of the legionary’s armour was making his eyes ache. Sussabarka caught the gesture with a flick of her eyes, shook her head and began to reply.

‘I command–’

‘You do not command me.’ Menoetius voice was flat, devoid of emotion, carrying nothing but a blunt truth. ‘You are strong. You are loyal, and you perform what you see as your duty with the fullness of your spirit. But now you will stand aside.’

One of the crimson-and-grey-clad troopers began to raise his weapon. Sussabarka’s hand slammed the trooper in the face, once, hard. He stumbled back, blood running bright from the flattened ruin of his nose. No one else moved. Menoetius had not even moved his eyes. Sussabarka nodded then moved from out of the doorway.

Menoetius bowed his head, slowly.

‘My thanks,’ he said, and stepped through the doorway into the bright vastness of the muster chamber beyond. Kord flicked a glance at the brigadier. She was

looking at him, her face still a mask, but he could feel the disgust in the sharpness of her eyes. He shrugged at her, and stepped after Menoetius.

The muster chamber was larger than even those of the Sapphire or Crescent City Shelters. The ceiling was a distant blur beyond a smog layer turned to white by stab-lights. War machines covered the rockcrete floor, turning the path they walked on a labyrinth of acid- and dust-scoured metal and oiled tracks. People surged between the machines. He passed tank crews, their unsealed enviro-suits hanging around their waists like half-shed skins. Labour teams lugged shells, charge packs and thick ribbons of ammunition. Test-firing engines coughed into the air, and the smell of exhaust fumes scraped the back of his throat. He was walking through a full battle muster.

He looked up and saw two gods of metal staring back at him. The twin Warhounds crouched in scaffold cages, the robes of attendant tech-priests standing out against the mottled grey and yellow of the Titans' skins. The harsh white of welding beams and phosphor cutters strobed from their joints, and manes of sparks fell from their feral heads.

Kord held the gaze of the pair for a second, before turning and hurrying after Menoetius. He suddenly did not like this, not at all; it just did not fit together.

'Where are we going?' he hissed. 'What are you doing?'

'Do you ask those questions because you think they require different answers, or because you don't understand that in these circumstances they are the same thing?' The Space Marine half turned his head, so that the edge of his eye caught Kord. He did not stop walking. 'My counter-questions are rhetorical. You need not reply.' He looked ahead again, in time to change direction, leading them down a gully created by twin lines of siege tanks. Kord began to feel sweat prickling his skin as he tried to keep pace. Menoetius waited a dozen strides before speaking again. 'To answer your query, I am overriding the Brigadier-Elite's authority, freeing you, and setting us both on a course to complete the mission you began.'

Kord shook his head.

'You disagree?' said Menoetius. 'I intend to finish what you began. You can come with us, or you can go back to your cell.'

'This will not finish. There is no way for this to finish,' said Kord. A sudden weight had fallen on his thoughts. He was free, but that freedom was meaningless. It was all meaningless. Right or wrong, he had no way back. The only thing that had pulled him forward, step by step and breath by breath, was gone, and no matter that the Space Marine seemed to share his sight, it did not matter.

'Is your human conviction so weak?'

'I was right. I am right. But that does not mean that we won't die out there with nothing found.'

‘All true, if you don’t know where to look.’

‘No, that does not make sense. Nothing I said could have made you believe me. I did not say enough to persuade her, and I could not have persuaded you.’

‘You are correct. My heart was curious, and my mind followed. You did not persuade me.’ Menoetius turned a corner and halted so swiftly that Kord almost fell as he followed. ‘Your crews did.’

Faces turned towards him. Some he knew; Kogetsu, Shornal, Zade and Saul nodded and gave ragged salutes. There was wariness in their eyes, hollowness too. He wondered how much they were here because they were loyal to him, or if, after everything, they had nothing else. Origo turned and straightened from where he bent over maps, which lay across the top of an ammunition crate. The lead scout bent his head and tapped his knuckle to his mouth, in a gesture that many of the Tallarn-born used in place of a formal salute. His eyes were as dark and calm as ever.

Kord smiled back, and turned to look around the circle of faces. Menoetius was a pace behind his shoulder, and behind him in turn another Iron Hand warrior in scored black plate, face hidden by a slotted faceplate, head distorted by a bulge of optical lenses over the right eye. Both stood motionless, a pair of buzzing statues. After a pause Menoetius stepped forward. The brushed steel fingers of his hand unfolded, and tapped the surface of the map.

‘We will go here,’ he said. Kord’s eyes skated across the lines and colours showing geographical features which now bore only secondary relation to the reality of Tallarn’s surface. Hundreds of marks had been made on the page. In part it resembled the map that he had used himself to track sightings of enemy units and engagements, but that creation was a shadow of the data which covered the map’s smooth surface. The portion indicated by Menoetius was a dense tangle of markers. Bounded by mountains and crossed by the paths of rivers, which would now be dried or slime-choked channels. ‘Hacadia’ read the lettering which ran under Menoetius’s fingers.

‘How have you done this?’ he breathed, his eyes still roaming over the information inked across the flattened images of mountains, hills, and plateaus. ‘This would take communication and engagement data from across our forces… I could never access such data.’

‘But I could, and I have,’ said Menoetius. Kord looked up into his gaze. Menoetius nodded once. ‘I am the bearer. You are the eyes through which meaning is given.’

He looked back down at the map. It was there, so clear that he thought that if he blinked the map parchment, ammo crates and floor would vanish and just leave the bones of the truth there, laid bare in front of him.

‘And what do you see?’ he asked without looking up.

‘A circle. An end,’ said Menoetius. ‘Do you not see it, colonel?’

‘No,’ breathed Kord. The coloured dots and lines were floating in his sight, the data next to them the shadows and planes of ragged curves that rippled out like the currents of water searching for a sink hole. He was right. He had always been right, and now he was seeing it: the image of a hidden reality that he had always known was there, just beyond his ability to see. ‘No. I don’t see a circle. I see a vortex.’

Hrend’s fist came up. If anyone had been watching from outside the pack of machines they would have seen a simple gesture, casual, fluid, like a hand raised in greeting. The meltagun armed and fired in an eye-blink of screaming air and white light. The back of the Alpha Legion Sicaran flashed white. The spear of energy stabbed through armour plates. The tank’s turret twitched, like the head of a man feeling the kiss of the knife in his back. Its ammunition core exploded. The hull ripped in two. Hrend had already stopped firing, was already turning, fast as an uncoiling tiger. The blast wave roared over him. The heat soaked into him. His iron frame was his body. There was no split, no difference between him and the roaring hunger of the guns in his flesh.

The other Alpha Legion tank slewed around, guns tracking. A shell flared from the muzzle of its main cannon. Hrend could see it, could see the shell ripple through the air, as though everything had become a tableau stuttering from frame to frame: the white-and-red death flower of the Sicaran, the Alpha Legion Land Raider skidding to a halt, the two Venators positioned to their rear, Orun twisting at the waist to train his guns on the surviving Sicaran. Only a second before everything had been steady, predictable, the blue hulls of the Alpha Legion machines moving beside the grey of the Cyllaros battlegroup.

The Land Raider accelerated away, braked and skidded around. Its assault ramp opened before it halted. Armoured figures scattered from within. Plasma and melta fire streaked from their weapons. The Land Raider began to pull backwards. A purple beam of light burned the ground where the Land Raider had been. The dust wind was a strobing swirl. The Alpha Legion was running forwards, the wind stripping the lacquer from their armour as they moved. They would not live long. The wind would cut through the seals on their armour, and Tallarn’s poisoned air would claim them. But until that happened they were still deadly.

Hrend swivelled, brought his hands up to fire. A beam of light struck him. He reeled. Hot white pain was everywhere. It was real, shockingly, overwhelmingly real. Shrieks of static blanked out the voices of his brothers, as though the storm wind had spilled into the vox.

And the black sun was there, like a hole cut in the storm.

‘Live,’ it whispered, a voice of silken promise, of breaking bones, of wind rattling through dry skulls and the call of carrion. *‘Your shadow waits.’*

No, he wanted to say. *No…* but the memory of the blood was filling his mouth with iron. The eyes of the Apothecary were looking down into his. They were empty, twin eclipses in the brightness.

‘What are you?’

‘I… am… Iron…’

‘Then live.’

He came forward, blindness falling from his sight. He fired, and fired again, missiles loosed from his back, the boltgun roared in his hands, and there were lights, the bright colour of molten ruin, the shriek of armour shattering, and he was kicking a figure from the ground making it fall like a smashed idol, and his fist was descending, and the sand and sky and stars beyond were screaming back.

He stopped, and the battlefield before him was quiet ruin. The song of iron wove around him, pulsing like the breaths he could no longer take.

You are iron, child, said the song. The Alpha Legion machines and troops were gone. Fire and ruin remained where they had been unmade. There were other twisted piles of metal and flame, but Hrend did not think of them. The fact of them did not matter. What other purpose did it have but to destroy and end?

Something was moving on the ground. He focused, his eyes swimming with the promise of targeting runes. A figure was crawling along the ground towards one of the wrecks. It was burning, flames and fluid rolling over the dust-scoured blue of its armour. Hrend walked to it, looked down, felt the heat and pleading of the strength in his hands.

He kicked the crawling figure over. Green eye lenses looked up at him. Hands reached for weapons that were not there. Hrend placed his foot on the warrior’s chest.

‘It ends here for you,’ he said in the vox.

‘Treachery…’ The voice that replied was a wet rasp. He could hear something broken and seeping in the word.

‘You are not the only ones to know its value, son of Alpharius.’

‘You will die out here…’

Hrend rotated his gaze up. The facts of the situation were slowly filtering into focus. Orun was there, close by, still alive, so was Jarvak and his machine. Crucially, the excavator also endured, its Venator escort clinging close. The storm was whipping the flames from the wrecks into bright spirals. Darkness was falling, the dust and dusk stealing all but the flame light.

He looked back down at the Alpha Legion warrior. He wondered if it was the one called Thetacron; he could not tell from the voice. He extended the smallest

portion of force into the foot resting on the warrior's chest. The ceramite creaked with pressure.

'No one knows you are here. The dust storm swallows your signals as well as ours. No warning will reach your masters.'

He paused, and within the soft coldness of his being he felt the question rise into existence.

'How many of my brothers have you murdered out here?'

'More…' The warrior paused, heaving a cracked breath. *'More than you will ever know.'*

'How did you know what we came for? How did you know we would seek it?'

At first he thought it was the sound of choking on blood. Then he realised it was a laugh.

'We already knew it was here, Iron Warrior.'

Hrend heard the words, and felt the silence form in the space after its passing. It felt like a lie. It felt like a desperate act of spite, like the last blow of a warrior breed who could never accept that they were not in control, who could not admit that they were not the centre of everything. It felt like it might be truth. He felt the fingers of his fist clack open and shut.

Hrend removed his foot from the warrior.

'And now that you have failed, who else is going to stop us now?'

'We are many.'

'And we…' growled Hrend. 'We are iron.'

He stamped down once. The warrior's head exploded in a spray of shattered iron and pulped skull. Hrend watched the corpse twitch once, and then opened another vox channel.

'Navigator,' he growled, and the panting breath of Hes-Thal answered him. 'It is here, you are certain?'

Hrend had kept his eyes on the blood seeping from the headless corpse into the dust. Already viral agents in the air had begun to reduce the blood and flesh to black sludge.

'You see it, Ironclad,' hissed Hes-Thal. *'And it looks back.'*

Hrend felt the instinct to nod. His iron body answered by shivering. He switched the vox to the channel linking him to the crew of the Spartan carrying the Navigator.

'Execute the Navigator,' he said. He did not wait to hear the confirmation. A second later he felt something which had been itching at the back of his skull cease.

'Here, on this ground you will begin.'

The excavator machine rumbled forward, and began to unfold. Stabiliser feet slammed into the ground. Its back hinged upwards, and armoured plates peeled

back like corroded insect wings. The drill head slid down towards the ground, teeth rotating, earth scoops rolling backwards over its bulk. Hrend stepped back. Beams of scanning light touched the dry ground, pulsed, swept then vanished. The other machines were moving around the great machine, settling into a circle. The drill teeth began to blur. Hrend watched piston feeds tense, and then the drill head slammed down. Earth fountained into the air, caught on the wind and blended into the billowing cloud. The ground began to tremble. Around him the fires of battle were still burning.

He looked down. The black sun was there, at the back of his sight, a cold presence on his shoulder. The drill was keening as it cut into the skin of Tallarn. He remembered again the conversation with Perturabo, back at the beginning of his quest.

'There is a weapon on this world, hidden in its heart, or buried in its skin,' Perturabo had said. 'The eldar call it the Cursus of Alganar. It is an ancient thing, old before Terra gave birth to humanity. It is why we came here, it is why we are still here – a weapon to lay low angels.' The metal sheen of the primarch's skin had dulled for a second, so that his face seemed dusted with ash. 'I want you to walk the surface of Tallarn, I want you to find it for me.'

Hrend had felt himself pause, and then gave the only answer he could.

'I will do this.'

Perturabo had begun to walk away without reply. He had been almost at the edge of the cavern when Hrend asked the question which had been drumming inside his head.

'Lord.' Perturabo had half turned, his automaton bodyguards halting with a ripple of overlapping shields. 'When we have it what will we do?'

The primarch looked at Hrend for a long moment, though whether judging or considering he could not tell.

'When we have it we will be what the universe forces us to be, and do what we must.' He dipped his head, and the light had drained from the lines of his face, leaving canyons of shadow. 'We will destroy all those who stand against us.'

The memory lingered at the edge of Hrend's thoughts as he watched the dust billowing onto the flame-touched wind. The fusion cutters on the drill head flared to brightness. Smoke and steam began to spill up, blending with the powdered earth. The drill cut deeper and Hrend felt Tallarn tremble.

The Iron Warrior was right in front of Argonis. The red eye-slit was so close that he could see the ghosts of tactical data projected onto the other side of the crystal. He reacted without pause. The gladius came up in a smooth motion, its power field snapping active the instant before its tip punched through the eye-slit. The Iron Warrior's head blew apart in an explosion of lightning. Argonis grabbed the

dead warrior's shoulder with his other hand, yanked the corpse through the door before he could fall and kept running.

The next door was coming up fast. Behind him Sota-Nul was hissing out sounds that sent sparks up his spine. They were counting on speed now, pure speed and aggression. The old way, the Cthonian way. The door snapped open in front of him. The space beyond spread outwards. Everything was the beat of alarms. He could hear the keening of aircraft engines. The ceiling above was peeling back to show the dust-smudged stars above. An oily shield flickered against the darkness beyond, holding back Tallarn's toxic air.

He kept moving, slowing his run to a determined stride, and clamped his weapons to his armour. He had passed this way before, when he had arrived. It had been filled with activity then, but nothing like this. Dozens of craft in black-and-yellow slashed metal were rising into the waiting dark. The noise was like the breath of iron gods. Gunships, strike fighters, bombers and landers rose from platforms on shimmering columns of anti-grav and jet thrust. They hovered in layers, waiting as those above them ascended into the night's sky. He knew what he was seeing: it was a full battle deployment.

He saw the *Sickle Blade*. The green and black of her fuselage a crow amongst the brushed metal of the Iron Warriors. Lights winked on the tips of her wings. A tracked servitor was uncoupling fuel lines from her belly. Part of him thanked the now dead Jalen for his preparation.

He quickened his pace. He felt eyes and sensor blisters turn towards him. The downwash glow of thrusters caught his sea-green and black-armour. High above, a wing of Lightning Crows breached the shield, and roared into the dark. He swung under the wing. Further away, an Iron Warrior in a spider-limbed servo-rig paused and looked towards them. The tracked servitor was backing away. Its steel limbs snapped inspection plates shut, pulling pins from the weapon systems. Sota-Nul and Prophesius were climbing the rear ramp.

He reached the ladder hanging beneath the cockpit, gripped and swung up in a single movement. Mag-clamps latched onto the power pack on his back and pulled him into the cockpit. Neural connections fizzed live with a tingle of static. Displays within the cockpit began to scroll with data. The engines woke. Power thrummed through the frame. His hands were moving without his thinking. The canopy closed over him. He could see data from the hangar's launch control. Out beyond the armoured crystal of the canopy the Iron Warrior with the servo-rig was moving closer, picking up speed. Whatever luck or plan had got them this far, it was about to run out.

Red warning runes began to pulse in his view. He could see other figures running now. The space above the canopy was a flow of ascending aircraft. Figures with weaponry were moving across the cavern floor: heavy bolters,

claviers, missile launchers. He blinked system control markers, overriding cut-outs as they flashed back warnings. The *Sickle Blade*'s weapon systems woke. The power in the engines was rising, vibrating through him. Machine voices began to shout in his ears, telling him to power the craft down, telling him that he was not cleared to launch. Iron Warriors were dropping into cover across the launch pad. Over the neural connection to the gunship he felt their rangefinders touch the *Sickle Blade*. They felt like cold needles.

He glanced upwards. The swarm of machines was still rising and rising. He looked down again. A voice was speaking in his helm, telling him to power his machine down.

'We are ready,' said Sota-Nul's voice in his ear. He nodded, keyed a control, and squeezed the firing trigger on the control column.

The *Sickle Blade* was a Storm Eagle. Tens of thousands of its breed served in the Great Crusade, and now in the civil war which had replaced it. But the *Sickle Blade* was more than a machine of war. She, and her ten sisters, had been born in the forges of Mars and given to the Sons of Horus as an honour gift. Masters had crafted each part of her. The gold feathers traced across her back and wings had been the work of one of the most gifted artisans, and the hand of the Fabricator General himself had woken her machine-spirit. She was a queen of her kind, and a queen made to fly through winds of fire and destruction.

The twinned heavy bolters in her chin spat fire. Explosions swallowed the Iron Warriors as Argonis untethered *Sickle Blade*'s thrusters. She lifted off the launch pad, still breathing fire. A beam of light flicked out from across the platform, skimming her left wing. Argonis pivoted the gunship in mid-air. The line of fire traced across the platform edge and sawed through the shooter. Brass casings cascaded from the gunship's cheeks.

Argonis's senses were a wall of target runes. The cavern floor was alive with frantic movement: more troops, more guns, less and less chance of survival. As soon as he had seen the Iron Warriors move to stop them, he had known that there was only one way out: havoc.

He turned his gaze on a fuel bowser, and blinked the target rune. The line of shells flicked sideways and touched the fuel canister. A sheet of flame spilled out in every direction, burning white, and rage-red. Argonis felt the *Sickle Blade* rock. His eyes flicked across the cavern floor, blinking between grounded gunships, munition stacks and fuel cells. Rockets loosened from *Sickle Blade*'s back. Fire clouds thumped into the air, racing upwards to brush the craft hovering above. One column of fire slammed into the belly of a strike fighter. The craft rose, twisted, flipped over and struck the cavern wall.

Argonis pushed power into the engines, and the *Sickle Blade* rose through the inferno. Beams of light and lines of shells cut the air beneath her. He paused for a

second, holding the breath in his lungs as the power in the engines became a shackled scream. The *Sickle Blade* tilted its nose up, still floating above the sea of fire and smoke. Argonis saw the stacked aircraft above; some had halted while others still rose to the dark beyond. He unchained the engine's power and they shot upwards. G-force punched him in the gut. Inside his helm, he smiled. Iron Warriors craft were streaming past, and he was an arrow spinning through them, spiralling higher and higher. The atmospheric shield was around them and then past them, and they were shooting high into Tallarn's night.

Clones, thought Iaeo, as she stared up at Jalen.

'Perhaps,' he said, and shook his head. 'The hydra has many heads.'

She blinked, and facts came together in her pain-streaked thoughts.

'Yes,' he said again, as though in reply. 'I am in your thoughts.'

'One…' she fought the word from her lips, 'One… less head… now.'

Jalen's eyes hardened, and tattoos unfolded across his skin.

'I thought your kind was created not to feel emotional pleasure at anything but a completed kill.'

'You have no idea what I am.'

'You are an assassin of the Vanus Temple, an infocyte operating under an Unbound Condition.' He smiled, a pleased and cruel smile. 'You did not think that the temples were unknown to the Twentieth, did you? We are the Alpha. We were there while your masters were still killing for coin.'

Data: Pride, the need for the defeated to acknowledge their superiority, a compulsive need for complexity and showmanship, all qualities of the Alpha Legion psychological pattern.

'But you have been out here and active for quite a while, haven't you?' he asked. 'You're not really built for that are you? The conditioning is probably fraying by now. You probably have started making mistakes.'

You have made an error, Iaeo.

You have made an error, Iaeo.

You have made an error, Iaeo.

'Of course you have made an error…' Jalen's eyes narrowed. '…Iaeo, the current situation is that error manifested.'

She closed her eyes, and tried to will her limbs to move. Fresh pain was the only answer. She managed to roll onto her side. Blood began to dribble from the right-hand side of her mouth. She could see her visor lying on the metal grating just an arm-reach away. She also saw the two other people she had heard. They were Alpha Legionnaires, but they wore compact recon armour. One held a fat-barrelled needle rifle, the other a block-framed assault shotgun. Both had near identical faces. They were not looking at her, but holding guard with the relaxed carelessness of poised predators.

She tried to move her hand towards her visor. It moved a few centimetres, and then the ice needles hardened in her nerves and her hand froze.

‘That’s far enough,’ said Jalen.

How did I allow this to happen? thought Iaeo.

‘Because to err is human,’ said Jalen, ‘and no matter what your clade gave to you, that is still all you are.’

No, she thought. *No, that is not right.*

Projections exploded in her head from memory, uncoiling into awareness from where she had buried them in hidden parts of her brain. They were vast, beautiful chains of probability, and possibility, of data inputted and data changed and pushed back into the world to do its work.

Jalen was frowning now, tattooed scales twisting and shimmering. She could feel the fingers of his mind in her thoughts now, cold fingers scrabbling to follow the exploding network of the full termination projection that she had created.

She allowed a smile onto her face. It was not natural, she had to imitate it from memory, but it fitted the moment well enough.

Thank you, she thought, and saw in his eyes that he heard. *Thank you for being so predictable.*

And she showed him what she had done, the manipulations she had hidden from him in her mind. There was just enough time for his pupils to bloom wide before the Iron Warriors security detail blasted onto the gantry and the first shots split the air.

The machines of war came from across the northern reaches of Tallarn. First hundreds, then thousands, then more than a mortal mind could count. They poured out of the buried shelters, long rivers of tanks, flowing down broken roads, across hills and plains. Knights, Dreadnoughts and Titans walked with them, striding amongst the flow of armour like men wading through a deep river. All flowed down into the plateau which spread across the heart of Tallarn's northern continent. Bound by mountains, the Khedive was a great, flat dish of land which had swallowed the blood of many since the battle for Tallarn had begun. Now the full strength of the loyalists poured into it without cease.

The Crescent City shelter emptied every machine which could move onto the plain, surging to meet the transporters which dropped from orbit to spill more and more machines onto the fog-veiled dust. More and more began to arrive, as the vanguards of forces which had ridden for days began to converge. Many stretched for hundreds of kilometres back across the continent. On the plain of Khedive the gathering forces marshalled, ordering themselves and pushing outwards as more arrived. Vanguard forces of skimmers took the mountain passes above the plateau unopposed, and within hours the first formations of heavier machines were grinding towards them.

The rising sea of iron did not go unopposed.

At the edge of the northern polar cap three Iron Warriors strike flights hit a convoy heading south from the Cobalack Shelter. The front five kilometres of the convoy became a burning grave of machines. Minutes later three Iron Warriors war groups hit the paralysed line of tanks from the side. Their convoy was annihilated, its fate screamed across the sky in an orange curtain.

To the south, a scratch force of Iron Warriors, Cassidnal Armour, and Cyberneticae maniples met a column coming from Essina Shelter advancing down the remains of the Northern Arterial Highway. The two forces met front on. The long snakes of machines broke apart, spreading across the land to either side of the highway as they each sought to encircle their enemies.

An hour after the first loyalists took the passes above the Khedive, the Iron Warriors struck back. Bombers and gunships poured explosives down on the mountain tops. Rock shattered under the rolling drum of explosions and the heat of the firestorm. Avalanches of cooling rock slid from the peaks, and roared down their flanks. Thunderhawks and Storm Birds skimmed the detonation wave to drop armoured units into the passes. Those few of the loyalist vanguard units remaining fought on but it was not enough. The Iron Warriors held the passes between the rising sea of loyalists and the Sightless Warren.

In the strategiums of the Sightless Warren, the Iron Warriors watched their enemy gather and saw the greatest opportunity for victory and defeat unfold before them. If they thought which of the two possibilities was more likely, none of them voiced their opinion. They waited for word from Perturabo, still in the void aboard the Iron Blood. *When that word came it was as direct as it was brutally simple.*

'Strike now with all strength. Hold them to the plains. Choke them in dead iron.'

His sons heard their primarch and obeyed.

The god-machines walk…

THIRTEEN

Storm centre
Cursus
Sickle Blade

Kord stared down the sight. The oil-black shape of the Iron Hands Predator was to his left. Both it and *War Anvil* had come to a halt as soon as they had crested the last line of hills and seen what waited for them on the plains of Khedive.

The storm was a pale band across the dying land. Dark smudges rolled within it, like bruises forming then fading in minutes. Lightning speckled its height. He could see the winds whipping its edges into blurred gauze. It was a great beast of a storm. He could feel the hairs on his neck and arms rising. Sparks of static were pinging off the hull. And there was something else, something that clung to the colours, and even to the stale taste of the air in his breath mask.

He had never believed in gods or supernatural forces. He had seen psykers and the impossibility they could make possible, but that was nothing more than something he did not understand, a subset of the many things which made the stars burn and time pass. The universe was a cold, uncaring machine, and humanity had only the place it could carve out for itself. Goodness, evil, kindness and cruelty, it was simply a matter of selecting belief. That was it. There was nothing more.

But as he looked into the storm he felt as if he were looking at something that he could only express in words that came from the language of myths.

It felt like looking into the face of a god.

'A vortex you said,' said Menoetius, his voice seeming to harmonise with the static of the vox. *'I thought you were intending your words to be metaphorical.'*

'The storm is spreading outwards and increasing in strength,' said Kord. 'This is an eater, bigger than I have ever heard tell of. Anything that goes in is unlikely to come out.'

'You spent the lives of almost all those under your command to come this far,' said Menoetius. *'You had the strength to spend their lives but not your own?'*

Kord kept his eye on the wall of rolling dust. Sweat was stinging his eyes.

'Colonel, I saw something,' it was Origo, from the position just in front of Kord, his voice breaking through his thoughts. Kord felt the fear recede, and become an itch at the back of his skull. The gunner had turned to look back at

him, eyes wide and bright behind the lenses of his suit. ‘Had it on the infra-sight for a second then it went. But it was there. A machine.’

‘For certain?’ Kord asked.

‘For certain.’

‘We are going in,’ he said into the vox then switched to speak to the rest of *War Anvil*’s crew. ‘All positions stand by to advance. Weapons ready.’

‘Colonel, the storm…’ called one of the crew, but he was not listening enough to even recognise their voice.

‘Advance,’ he said, and a second later *War Anvil* obeyed his will.

The winds closed over them with fingers of air which slammed against the hull and rattled grit on the hatches. Within a minute they could not see anything with their normal eyes except a swirling layer of dust the colour of bruises. Images danced and collapsed on the auspex screen. The infra-sights showed nothing. Every few moments lightning would split the view through the sight. *War Anvil* rocked as it ground onwards. Kord was breathing slowly, feeling his heart hammer as he waited for something to appear on the scope.

The drill went silent. Hrend felt the ground beneath his feet become still. He turned, suddenly aware that he had been drifting. Time had passed as the storm pulled at them. They were at its centre, he was certain, but even here they felt its touch. The shapes of the other machines were unmoving, with billowing dust shrouding them and then revealing their shapes again. The heat signatures of each were a low murmur of brightness in his heat-sight. The breath of the air was muted, hushed, waiting.

Hrend turned towards the excavator the great machine was awake, its engines still turning. Cables connecting it to its drill head disappeared down a wide hole angled into the ground. They looked slack, as though cut while under tension.

‘What is the drill status?’ asked Hrend.

‘It is no longer functioning,’ said the monotone servitor. ‘Cause unknown.’

Hrend walked to the opening in the ground. The drill had cut down at an angle, creating a sloped passage, which slid to a cold darkness. The sides of the hole were rough glass, fused solid by fusion torches. The lights mounted on Hrend’s shoulders lit with a thought. The hard, white light spilled down the glistening shaft. Far down something glinted, a hard edge of something reflective catching the light. The cables and feeds for the drill head lay on the floor, two lines plunging down, beckoning.

Hrend was about to turn when he heard something. He went still, and turned slowly back to the hole. The black disc of the shaft’s depths filled his sight, its edges fraying the light he shone at it. He heard the sound again, distant but distinct: a whisper of a voice, a voice that should not be here. Inside the coffin of his body he felt his true body shiver. The wind gusted around him, dust scraping

across his frame. The blank disc before him seemed to swell and push against the light. It did not look like dark pooling at the end of a tunnel now. It looked like a black sun.

He took a step down the tunnel. The glass layer crunched under his foot. He felt calm, cold even. The wind was spilling a gauze of dust down the tunnel. He took another step.

His footing slipped, and suddenly he was falling, glass screaming as metal scored into its surface. He tried to turn, but his sight was a crazed mass of warning runes.

He slammed to a halt. His sight fizzed for a second, then steadied.

He rose, the light from his carapace touching the rainbow sheen of the walls. He looked back up the shaft. The sky was a distant circle high above. He turned his gaze back to what had stopped his descent.

The drill head, or what remained of it, lay across the tunnel. A neat slice ended the blunt mass of the machine after a metre. It simply stopped after that, as if something had cleaved the front portion away. Hrend shifted and watched as the stab-light caught the bright edges of precisely cut metal. Hrend looked up at what lay just beyond the truncated drill.

A wall of black stone met the beams of light. It was part of a larger structure. Hrend could see that at a glance, the slight curvature of the stone told him that he was looking at a small part of a great, curved wall, perhaps even a circle, hidden beneath the ground like a buried crown. Its substance looked like no stone or crystal Hrend had ever seen. At first it seemed opaque, but as Hrend watched the light slid beneath the surface and kindled reflections within its depths.

It was then that he saw the carving on the surface. A face was looking out at him. It was not human. Wide eyes looked out from a slim face above a mouth filled with needle teeth. It might have been snarling. It might have been grinning. It might have been screaming.

He heard something behind him, a low sound, somewhere between a hiss and a laugh. He turned, and the light found only the glass of the passage walls. Hrend turned back to the wall of black stone. He froze. In his capsule of amniotic fluid his true body shivered uncontrollably.

The carved face had moved. Its lips had closed over its shark smile, and its head had turned, its gaze seeming to focus on a point just…

‘Iron,’ said a voice behind him. He twisted, arming his weapons.

A figure stepped from the blackness. Its presence seemed to strain at the boundaries of the machine that encased it. Black pit eyes looked at Hrend as it halted.

‘Do you still wish to be iron?’ asked the face of Perturabo.

The skies of Tallarn danced with light. Re-entry fires streaked the dark, hundreds of them, thousands of them. The stars hid behind the blink of low-orbit explosions. Iron was pouring out of the sky, landers, drop pods, gunships and attack craft falling from the heavens. Beneath them the nightside of Tallarn bubbled with explosions, sparkling as though scattered with liquid gold.

Argonis climbed, running the engines red, listening to warning chimes ring in his ears but not listening. He was hauling the *Sickle Blade* on a corkscrew path towards the point of light that was the *Iron Blood*.

Thinning atmosphere streamed past the *Sickle Blade*. Feathers of heat edged its wings. Space bloomed above Argonis, and the roar of passing air dropped away.

Alert chimes screamed from his helm. Threat warnings flashed at the edge of his eyes. He slammed the *Sickle Blade* into a tumble as lines of las-light scored the void behind it.

'*Brother,'* Volk's voice fizzed across the vox. *'Cut your engines.'*

Argonis glanced at the auspex. A trio of runes was closing on him, fast. Weapon lock warnings chimed in his ears. Ahead of him the marker of the *Iron Blood* was swelling in his sight. Screens of ships and shoals of fighter craft blistered the void around it.

'You fire on me, you fire on the Warmaster,' said Argonis.

'You have drawn our blood, you have broken our trust.'

'There is no trust left in this war, brother.'

'You will not escape.'

'I do not intend to escape.'

'Whatever you intend, you will die here.'

'You did know your limitations, brother,' said Argonis, and cut the connection. Hostile weapon lock alerts screamed in his ear. He spun the *Sickle Blade*, shedding countermeasures in a fire-burst cloak. Bursts of las-fire licked the void. He was breathing hard, gravity slamming into him like hammer blows. He fired his thrusters, and the *Sickle Blade* tumbled.

'Missiles loose, and locked onto us,' said Sota-Nul's voice.

'I am aware,' he said. An explosion bloomed in the spinning night as a missile hit a decoy pod. He waited, feeling the G-force smear his flesh against the inside of his armour. The *Iron Blood* and its escorts were closing fast. There were a lot of ships in the spheres around Tallarn, the war in the void mirroring the escalating battle on the ground.

'Incoming ordnance,' called Sota-Nul, and building-sized torpedoes were suddenly burning past him. He spun through their thrust wake. The Iron Warriors were close behind, lacing the void with las-fire. Everything was getting very tight. Flying directly into a battle-sphere was not ideal, but did give Argonis certain advantages. A pursuing missile cluster hit one of the warheads and

detonated. The torpedo corkscrewed off course, hit another warhead, and the void became a bright layer of boiling light.

The *Sickle Blade* rode ahead of the blast wave. Warships loomed ahead of them. Stitched planes of cannon fire spread from their flanks. Challenges and warnings filled Argonis's ears.

The trio of strike fighters broke from the inferno behind him, dragging banners of burning gas.

'Those ships have seen us.'

Argonis ignored the tech-witch, and flicked the vox to a multiple band, maximum power transmission.

'*Iron Blood* and escorts, this is Argonis, emissary of Warmaster Horus and bearer of his will. You will prepare for us to come aboard.'

A clod of burning debris spun in front of the *Sickle Blade*. Argonis rolled under it. Behind him the three strike fighters hugged close. Las-bolts streaked past.

'*Cut your engines now,'* said Volk over the vox.

Argonis flipped the *Sickle Blade* over, watched a target rune lock green on a strike fighter, and squeezed a firing trigger. The closest fighter became a burst of blue and white light. The *Sickle Blade* flipped back over and rolled away from its kill.

'Fall back, Volk,' said Argonis. 'You were never good enough to take me, and mercy does not suit me.'

A scattering of las-bolts answered.

Argonis switch back to the broad transmission, and spoke again.

'*Iron Blood*, this is the emissary of the Warmaster. I demand immediate audience with your primarch.'

Identification ciphers travelled with his words. No reply came. Behind him the two remaining strike fighters were closing and firing. The *Iron Blood* was a growing splinter of light against the stars, its shields fizzing as it ploughed through battle debris.

'In the name of Horus, you will comply.'

He could see the great gun batteries of both the flagship and its escorts, building-sized barrels yawning at him with the promise of certain obliteration.

So far to come, he thought, and the dance of light and explosions seemed to fade into a background. So far from the tunnels of Cthonia. So far from a near-starved youth with a mirror knife and a false smile. He was not sure if he would have chosen the decades of life he had lived. But then it seemed there was little choice in this life, and the first lesson of the gang wars he had learned was the only thing that still held true: we are born alone, and if we live it is alone, and in the end we die alone. His hands went still on the controls, and the *Sickle Blade*'s dance became a simple, straight line drawn towards its future.

Fire and darkness slid past him. He heard voices, but did not listen to them. He did not want this, he had never wanted any of it, but there had never been an alternative besides the swift, endless fall to oblivion. He thought of those he had grown up with, the gang warriors who had bled out into the dark. He thought of the brothers he had watched go down to Isstvan III not realising it was the last thing they would ever do. He thought of Horus, the warrior king who was his master, his primarch, but not his father. And he waited for the fire, and the silence beyond.

'Emissary,' the voice filled his head and grated down his spine. The las-fire had vanished from the void around him. The markers of the two remaining strike fighters moved into positions just beyond his wing tips. *'You wish my presence. So come to me,'* said the voice of Perturabo. In front of Argonis the guns of the *Iron Blood* turned away, and he saw doors open on a black and waiting space within, like teeth around a mouth.

The Iron Warriors fired as they broke onto the gantry. Iaeo had an instant to recognise the scream of rotor cannons spinning up. Then the first line of bullets cut across the platform. Jalen dived to the side. Behind him the two Alpha Legionnaires were dropping and firing, the gun booming a counter-rhythm to the scream of the cannons.

Data: Estimated force of Iron Warriors deployed fifteen.

She could see them out of the corner of her eye, heavy silhouettes of armour, slab shields and glowing gun barrels. They were advancing down the gantry, shaking it with synchronised strides. She had brought them here. A timed signal aimed precisely to bring an Iron Warriors detail here at this moment. Without Argonis's breakout it would not have worked. She had brought target and termination together, just as intended.

The Alpha Legion warriors were calling to each other, short harsh stubs of decisions and commands. Jalen was flat on the grating. She saw one of the Alpha Legion warriors begin to move forward towards the pinned man. A second rotor cannon opened up and cut the warrior in half before he had taken a stride.

Jalen turned his head where he lay. She was looking right into his eyes. She felt something move in her mind, an echo of disbelief and fury. The tattoos of serpents and lizards were squirming under his eyes. She still could not move, but she thought of nodding, and knew that he felt the gesture.

The Iron Warriors' fire shifted. Jalen began to rise. A round pinged from the floor grating, and blew out his knee in a shower of bone and blood. He stumbled, tattooed face twisting in pain. He pushed himself up. A line of rotor cannon fire ripped him in two.

Data: Two of three triplet operatives, designate name Jalen, eliminated.

The numbness pinning her limbs released. There was a lot of pain to cope with. She tensed her muscles. Splintered bones cut into them. Fresh pain. Hard rounds ripped through the gantry, shaking it, shredding it. The Iron Warriors had formed a shield wall thirty paces away. The rotor cannon fire stopped. The last Alpha Legion warrior was still alive but had retreated, trying to reach a point where he could exit the kill zone. She saw movement behind the shield wall, and two narrow gaps opened in its front. The muzzles of heavy flamers thrust through the gaps, pilot lights bright against scorched metal.

She rolled to her left, her hand finding and grasping her visor. The torn edge of the gantry framed a drop to darkness. She paused for an eye-blink, hearing the rising pressure of the flamer hoses, seeing the black gulf below.

The end was so close now, all the lines of possibility drawing to a point, to a resolution. The projections said that most likely things would proceed without her now. Causality had developed its own, irreversible momentum.

Most likely… an imprecise phrase, the kind of phrase that would have earned her punishment and scorn from her mentor. But she was beyond exhausted, and the old master was a long time dead.

The flamers fired. She rolled over the edge of the gantry, blackness rising to meet her as flames filled the air above.

Fire, smoke, and the roar of shattering metal filled the vast bowl of the Khedive. The mountains and hills running its circumference cupped over three million square kilometres of land. Wide enough that the sun would rise on one edge hours before its first rays would touch the other, it had been an ocean of swaying grass before the virus bombing. Terraced orchards had marched up the lower slopes of the surrounding mountains. In the high years of the Great Crusade, armies had gathered on the plains beneath, vast, system-cracking forces laid out in gridded order across areas so large that time marks changed twice between the outer edges of the muster.

Armies filled it again, and the sky above roared with the engines of warplanes and landing craft. But the order of the past was as much a memory as the sway of grass and the smell of fruit blossom blowing from the mountains.

The Khedive had become a nest of battles. There was not one engagement, there were hundreds, coiling together, spawning and eating each other by the second. By night the plain rippled with detonations and explosions, turning the fog-laced air to bloody red and strobing orange. By day the smoke thickened the fog to hide the sun behind black veils. Titans strode through the murk, firing at targets beyond the horizon. Within hours a new, ever-changing topography of wreckage had swallowed the shape of the earth beneath. Tangles of dead machines formed forests of black metal beneath the slumped bodies of Knights. Plasma storms raged for hours in places where the greatest war machines fell. Spirals of glowing energy howled as they sucked the wind inside them.

Into this cauldron both sides poured more and more of their strength. Columns of loyalist forces from distant shelters continued to arrive. Many had spent much of their fuel and air just to reach the battle site, and failed within hours of joining. Many rolled from the southern passes only to die within seconds of touching the plateau. Fighters spun through the smoke as they hunted the landers that still dropped from the orbiting ships.

To the eyes of those looking down their gun sights, or at the screens of their auspexes, there seemed to be no order, just the unending roar of explosions and the flash of detonation. They were not fighting to a plan, they were just fighting what was in front of them. To other eyes, though, eyes that watched from high above and far away, there was a pattern, written in the shift of numbers, losses and ground held. It said that victory could go to either side, but that whoever lost the Khedive would not be able to hold Tallarn.

FOURTEEN

Iron from within
Metatron
Termination complete

War Anvil was firing blind. Every gun was roaring, the sound of the storm drowning in the rolling crash of guns. He could hear the voice of Menoetius, of Origo, and the rest, each one calling out words which shattered as the hull rang and rang like a struck anvil.

They had found the Iron Warriors.

The auspex showed the heat blooms of multiple machines. Heavy calibre rounds began to strike the front of *War Anvil*. The main gun fired, and the breech slammed back. The smoking casing rang as it fell into the space beneath. A second late the demolisher fired. Kord was half aware of a red target mark vanishing from the auspex.

A kill, he thought, but his eyes were pulling back to the sight block. The world outside was a swirl of dust and storm wind split by lightning and gunfire. He could see something though, something blunt and vast, covered by cables, its bulk stabilised by piston feet. He recognised it: a macro drill, its back tilted up. He could see the wind sweeping the top off heaped earth. A thrill of elation snapped through him. This was it, this was the answer. The Iron Warriors were not looking for something on the surface but beneath the earth of Tallarn.

He watched, tracking the silent drill machine, even as Menoetius's Predator cut across his sight, firing on the move, stabbing at machines which were blurs behind the storm curtain. They were receiving fire, but he could tell they were winning. How could they not? He had been right, he had–

The beam snapped out from the storm and skimmed the top of *War Anvil*'s right track. Kord felt the heat of the beam's touch through the hull. The other track kept turning. The machine slewed around.

The bottom edge of its running track hit a pile of debris and pitched it over. For a long, terrible second, Kord felt *War Anvil*'s weight shift like a ship riding a wave. Then the tank tipped onto its side, rocked, and went still. Kord's head hit the sight mount in front of him, and the world went grey. The engine drive kept turning the left tracks. He could feel blood on the inside of his suit's hood. He could still hear the roar and boom of battle outside.

Something moved close to him, and he twisted to see Origo holding the side of his head. There was blood on the inside of his left eyepiece just under where his hand was pressed. The replacement gunner twisted around as Kord moved, and his hand snapped out, gripping Kord's own hand. There was still strength in the grasp, a lot of strength. Kord instinctively pulled his hand back but Origo held on.

'Call for help,' he said, his voice a rasp over the internal vox. 'Call them, call anyone and they will know, they will come for us.'

The engine drive finally cut out, and now there was just the muffled clamour of battle beyond the hull.

Kord shook his hand free of Origo's grasp and the gunner curled back, still holding his head. Kord found the key for the squadron-wide vox.

'Menoetius,' he called.

'Two targets still active, colonel.'

'We are–'

'Your situation is evident, colonel. It will be addressed after the engagement.' Menoetius's voice was ice cold, and unmovable.

Kord's head was whirling with pain, numbness and delayed panic whirling.

'Call, they will hear,' said Origo again, his hand still pressed to the bloody side of his head. His voice sounded distant, almost slurred. 'They will come. My brothers are dead. I am the last but they will come. We have found it. Tell them. They will come.'

Kord looked at the gunner. There was something odd in the man's voice, a simultaneous note of desperation and certainty. He sounded like he was not really talking to Kord. He thought of the blood smeared on the inside of the man's eyepieces where his head had smashed into the main gun mount. Damage, concussion, delirium, but in one thing he was right. Kord twisted and strained until his fingers found the main vox controls, and switched it to broad transmit with maximum power on every loyalist frequency. The storm wind was rising rattling dust on *War Anvil*'s belly, the sound rising to blend with the noises of battle. He hesitated, adrenaline making his hands shake.

Was there any point? Would his words reach through the storm? Would anyone come if they heard?

'To anyone that can hear, this is Colonel Kord of the Tallarn Seventy-First. We are damaged, unable to move. Current location grid 093780 in the Hacadia Flats. Please respond.'

'Master?' spoke Hrend, but did not move. His sight was popping with static, runes and data fizzing into and out of existence.

'You have succeeded, my son. You have succeeded where all others have failed. You have walked the paths which others have walked, but for you, they have led you here.'

‘What is this?’

‘This is destiny. This is a chance that will never come again, not for you, not for your brothers or your father.’

‘You are not my master. You are not Perturabo.’

Hrend raised his remaining arm, fingers snapping wide, meltagun… cold and dead in his grasp. The creature which was not Perturabo, but which wore his face, smiled.

‘No I am not. We are your shadow, Iron Warrior, but that is not why we are here.’

‘This discussion is over,’ growled Hrend. He activated his vox-link, formed a transmission to Jarvak on the surface. The signal did not even start.

The creature shook its head slowly.

Pain burrowed through Hrend, as one by one each of his neural connections began to burn. The pistons on his legs began to bleed pressure, cogwork and servos unwinding. He slid to the floor like a great, metal puppet with its strings cut.

Light continued to stream from his carapace-mounted lights, sheeting upwards, catching the angles of his fallen shape and casting them against the roof and walls. The figure of Perturabo cast no shadow, but bled into the gloom at its edges. It looked down on him, and cocked its head to one side as though observing phenomena it had not encountered before.

‘We are here to offer you a choice, Ironclad.’

Hrend could feel the metallic bulk of the Dreadnought frame all around him. He could not move, even the ghost sensations of his severed arm were gone.

‘What are you?’ His voice scratched from his speaker grille.

‘You know what we are,’ said Perturabo’s voice. ‘We have met many times. We were there in the birth of your Legion and your brother Legions. We were there as you bloodied the stars. When you felt your first surge of martial pride, we felt it with you. When you bled, we were in the blood that stained the ground. When you felt the wounds to your honour, and dreamed of iron, we were both the wound and the dream.’

The figure’s shape blurred, its substance and shape becoming dust and smoke. Other faces rose from the cloud: a face of cold hard lines beneath a shock of white hair, a face smiling in sympathy and mockery, a face which radiated control from its feral lines. On they went, sliding from one onto another until they were a blur, until they were one.

And through the carousel of shape and shadow he saw new faces rise, faces of hounds cast of fire and brass, faces of pale flesh with razor-cut smiles, faces lost beneath clumps of tumours and veils of boils, faces that held other faces within them. He felt the heat of the fires of Isstvan V again. He could feel fingers he no

longer had burning to black twigs, and eyes boil again in the empty sockets of his skull.

A sudden burst of red and orange light spiralled down the tunnel walls. The creature moved aside, so that Hrend could see the disc of light that was the tunnel's mouth. The angry glow grew and stuttered, and he heard the roar of gunfire, the scream of energy splitting armour. His vox activated. Noise screamed into his mind. He recognised the voices: Jarvak, Orun, the crews of his cadre, the crews who had been strong enough to reach here. They were dying.

'This is not an end,' said the creature. 'This is a crossroads.'

'We will destroy you.'

The creature wore Perturabo's face again to smile.

'You cannot destroy what will be,' said the creature. 'You can only choose.'

The shadows began to crawl away as furnace light swelled through the dark. Hrend's metal body began to glow with heat. Fire was pouring inside his iron coffin. He was burning away. The fluid around him boiled. His flesh sloughed from his bones. Black blisters formed across his sight as the last moisture in his corpse became smoke. He could still see, but the world was not as it had been.

'See, Ironclad,' purred the creature. 'See what you can be.'

Then he realised that he was standing, that his own limbs were unfolding beneath him. He was a glowing, molten god, his skin the cracked black skin of cooling lava. He felt his thoughts cut free of all concerns. He was a line running through time, a summation. He had been there when the first fortress fell. He had lived as the shell fell through from a clear sky onto a town that would cease to be. He had broken the skin of worlds, and roared his existence in the voice of the firestorm. There was only one beat and measure to this life and that was the heartbeat of the firing gun and the noise of bones breaking under the fall of hammers. He was not flesh. He was not blood, or fragile bone. He was obliteration, and he stood beneath the fire shroud of worlds.

The vision dissolved but still he stood. His armour was fading to red and black heat. He could feel it. He could feel it as though it were the heat of his own burning blood. He looked down. His arms were there, glistening, wet, like blood and muscle. Shackled power and heat coiled in his hands. He let out a breath. Smoke and steam hissed into the air. He raised his head, with a rattle of cogs and crack of bones.

'Your Legion will be as you,' said the creature. 'They can live, you can live. You can all be more than you dreamed. This is the truth of iron. Iron within and without, iron in the veins, iron screaming to the sky. It is the truth you have reached for all your life. Through pain, and death, and the drum of guns, you have walked here. You can be more than this. You can rise from it.'

He could see it, he could feel it: a Legion of iron and death, burning the stars, cowed by none and broken by nothing. It was what they were always supposed to be, what they should have been. Decimation, dishonour and betrayal would mean nothing.

‘Call to your Legion, Sollos,’ the voice sounded like a song hissed through a skull’s teeth. ‘Call to your Perturabo. Call to your brothers. Bring them here. Bring them to the gate of the gods.’

He felt his thoughts reach for the vox, and he knew that all he needed to do was to speak, and his call would reach through the storm above, and bring his father to the weapon he had murdered a world for.

And then he remembered the light of the ghost world beneath a black sun, and the shrieks of the Emperor’s Children. The true face of his father, shrunken, but still strong, looked at him out of the core of his being.

‘No,’ said Hrend, his voice shaking as it fought to rise above the echoes of battle spilling down the shaft from above. He could feel the heat of his body pulling at his thoughts, could hear the thud of shells coughed into flight, and hear the scream of melting metal. The song of destruction called to him. It was him. It was the voice of his shadow.

‘No,’ his voice growled out, rising in power with every word forced out. ‘You will not take our strength. You will not make us slaves to darkness.’

The creature laughed, and the laugh became the shaking ground and the roar of explosions. Hrend felt the furnace heat drain from his remade body. He tried to take a step towards the creature. The force sent cracks racing across his body. The fire at the core of him was dimming.

The creature shook its head, and stepped back towards the exposed patch of black stone.

‘To refuse is still a choice. This end already stalks your Legion. You have already given yourselves. This is the Gateway to the Gods, the place of change, the door between past and present. The Eye of Terror is not amongst distant stars, son of iron. It is within you. It is here. The choice is not if, Ironclad. It is when.’ The light of an explosion blinked down the passage. The creature was gone. A face of empty eyes and razor teeth stared at Hrend from the black wall of stone. It smiled in the stuttered blink of explosion light. ‘So, my son, do you still wish to be iron?’

‘Iron…’ he hissed in a voice of dying static. He reached into the furnace within him, into the stinking core of obliteration, and pulled. ‘Iron comes from within.’

The atoms of his being scattered outwards in a blinding white shock of heat. The earth flashed to vapour in a sphere around where he had stood. Burning gas raced up the mouth of the tunnel, and blew from the surface, in a single, brilliant, spike of fury. The shockwave spilled outwards. The wreckage and still-burning

remains of vehicles shook where they lay, and then began to tilt downwards as a gulf opened beneath them. Dust and debris poured down into the expanding crater. The machines tumbled downwards, drowning in the earth spilling after them.

And then silence fell.

The dust plume hung in the air, the storm already pulling apart its substance. Beneath it the wind was already dragging fresh dust over the shallow crater, a vast hand wiping it away as though it had never existed.

On the edge of the desolation the hull of a tank lay on its side, like a fallen grave marker.

‘You have drawn blood amongst my warriors, emissary,’ Perturabo’s voice rose over the roar of engines, as Argonis jumped down from the *Sickle Blade*’s cockpit. The hangar bay was a mass of stilled activity. Rocket engines were keening, war machines hung in the cradles beneath landers: all ready to fall on Tallarn. Perturabo stood before the brushed steel bulk of a huge tank, ringed by his Iron Circle automata. His augmented bulk swelled and contracted as though in time with great slow breaths. A slit-fronted helm covered his face, and he stared at Argonis with eyes of cold, blue light.

‘You have concealed the truth from your Warmaster,’ said Argonis, forcing strength into his voice. Behind him he heard Sota-Nul and Prophesius come to stand behind him. The Lord of Iron’s gaze did not shift. He was still, but Argonis could feel pressure in that stillness, like a storm surge held back behind a dam.

‘I have done what I needed to,’ said Perturabo. ‘As I have always done.’

Argonis shook his head.

‘It no longer matters, it is over, lord. You will withdraw from this place.’

‘You do not know what you say.’

‘I do.’ Argonis glanced at the waiting craft, and thought of the battle in the void he had seen around Tallarn, and of the glittering carpet of explosions on its surface.

‘This is not a battle fought for strategic gain. It is a battle for…’

‘For a weapon against betrayal.’

‘A weapon hidden from those you serve?’

‘We serve no one,’ snarled Perturabo, and the words sent ice through Argonis.

‘The Warmaster–’

‘He was my brother before he was Warmaster.’ Perturabo shook his head. ‘I do this for him, for all of us.’

Argonis shook his head.

‘You will withdraw. This battle is over.’

‘We cannot do that.’ Argonis turned to see Forrix step from behind a Thunderhawk. The First Captain aimed a volkite charger at Argonis. With him

stood a line of dull-armoured Terminators. All of their weapons pointed at him, and Argonis could feel the death promised by the black circle of each barrel. ‘We must finish this,’ said Forrix.

‘It is over!’ Argonis shouted.

‘That order is not yours to give,’ said Forrix. Argonis looked back to Perturabo.

‘You claim loyalty–’

‘You will not speak to me of loyalty. I have given loyalty many times over, loyalty counted in lives and blood.’

‘I speak as the Warmaster.’

Argonis did not even see Perturabo move, but suddenly the primarch was looming above him. The deck rang with the echo of his steps.

‘You are not my brother,’ growled Perturabo. ‘Your voice is not his.’

‘No,’ said Argonis, fighting the instinct to turn away, to flee. ‘No, it is not, but I bear the Warmaster’s voice with me.’

He stepped back, his hand pulling a crooked key from where it hung around his neck. Prophesius stepped forward, as though called. Time seemed to have become syrup. The sounds of the chamber around muted. Colours dimmed, and faded to grey. Argonis felt his skin prickle as he reached out to fit the key into the back of Prophesius’s mask.

‘What is… it?’ he had asked Maloghurst.

‘A creation of the Davinite priests. It was once an astropath. Now they call it a metatron, a conduit for voices, a caster of shadows from one place to another, no matter how distant. It is named Prophesius.’

‘Why is it masked?’

Maloghurst had smiled before answering.

The key slotted into the mask. Argonis felt his arm jerk, as though he had just touched a power cable. He could taste cinnamon and ozone. He turned the key. For an instant nothing happened. Then there was a click, then another, and another, and another, rattling together, like a chorus of unwinding springs and turning cogs. The back of the mask split apart. Prophesius’s hands were shaking, fingers gripping the air. The wax tablet dropped from its grasp, melting as it fell. Shrill cries filled Argonis’s ears as he stepped back. Forrix flinched, his aim dropping. Every living creature on the deck reeled. All except Perturabo.

The mask fell from Prophesius’s head. Beneath there was a lump of pale flesh, and a wide, toothless mouth.

For a second the unmasked Prophesius just stood, its mouth flapping bonelessly. Then the mouth opened wide. And opened. And opened. A single, silent word came from within. Argonis felt it ring in the back of his skull, and vibrate in his bones. Glowing ashes and snow were falling in the air, and the word went on and on until it reached somewhere that was not here, but was just a

shadow away. Smoke and ash vomited from Prophesius's mouth. The black cloud billowed, clotted, hardened, became something harder than smoke, yet thinner than light.

An armoured figure stood before them. The pelt and head of a huge wolf covered his shoulders. His clawed hand rested on the head of the mace that lay at his foot. Argonis bent his knees without being aware of the command passing from his thoughts.

Above him the shadow of Horus looked down at the Lord of Iron.

'Perturabo,' said Horus, and his voice was the hunger of flames and the crack of breaking ice.

Perturabo did not move.

'Brother,' he said, his voice steady.

'No,' said Horus, and his shadow form seemed to grow, light draining into the holes that were his eyes. 'No, not brother. I am your Warmaster, Perturabo, and I have watched from beside my emissary. I have seen what you have hidden from me.'

'Horus…' began Perturabo, but Horus's voice cracked out like a lash of thunder.

'You have deceived *me*. You have sought power, and kept it hidden from *me*. You have spent *my* forces for your own ends.'

The thundercloud presence of Horus grew larger, looming high, so that it looked down like the cloud of an explosion above a dead city. Argonis felt pressure building in his skull.

Beneath Horus's eyes Perturabo remained, a vast figure made small, yet still unbowed.

'Everything I have done has been for the Imperium we will build. Brother, you cannot be blind to serpents within us. I have seen the true face of our allies. I have felt the knife of their treachery. We must hold our own blade above their necks, or we will be unmade. It is almost in my grasp.' He seemed to shiver. 'Please, my brother, listen to me now. Trust me now.'

The silence grew in the growing crackle of the storm charge. Then Horus's shadow shook its head.

'You have strayed, Perturabo,' he raised his hand, 'and now you will hear my will.' The shadow of Horus seemed to shrink, to become harder. Argonis could barely keep his eyes open. He could feel the spit boiling on his tongue. He saw the shadow of talons reach towards Perturabo.

'Kneel,' said Horus.

Iaeo fell to the waiting dark. Air rushed past her, pulling strings of blood from her body. She was dying. There was no escaping that fact. It was not even a projection, it was a fact: too much physical damage to live, and that was ignoring

what the fall promised at its end. Her mind had responded by working faster, like a candle burning bright and clear before it went out.

And in the stopped-clock world of her fall, she heard the last strands of her creation resolve.

She heard the order to begin a tactical withdrawal roll through Perturabo's forces.

She heard the Alpha Legion signal channels buzz with confusion.

She heard the click of her last handful of seconds fall into the past.

It had been a long journey, a long way from the beginning of the mission to this end. All the projections had ended, all the variables had resolved. All apart from one. One final strand of unfixed possibility.

She cut away the sound of all the signals and the influx of data, until a single vox signal remained. The voice it carried rattled with static, but it was clear.

'To anyone that can hear, this is Colonel Kord of the Tallarn Seventy-First. We are damaged, unable to move. Current location grid 093780 in the Hacadia Flats. Please respond.'

No response came. Several communication arrays on both sides had caught it, but she alone heard Kord's voice. Filters and cut-outs meant that it would only reach the ears of others if she allowed it.

It had been the most tenuous part of the kill-projection, using Kord's obsession, feeding it, positioning him to ensure that Hrend's force never returned. It had worked though, and now they were a last unresolved factor.

'To anyone that can hear, this is Colonel Kord of the Tallarn Seventy-First. Please respond.'

If no one else heard the signal then *War Anvil* would become just another machine lost to Tallarn.

'If you can hear, please respond.'

They would survive for a while, but with Perturabo's forces withdrawing no one would go looking for them, and the loyalists would never hear their cries for help. No one would find what they had found.

'Please respond.'

They would end in silence when their air ran out.

'Please…'

A dust storm would come and cover them over, and their machine would become their tomb.

'…respond.'

She cut the signal.

Two seconds later her fall ended. Her last thoughts echoed in the now empty space of her mind.

Termination complete. No errors.

Six days after it began, the Battle of Khedive ended. It ended not with fire, but with a slow, exhausted fading of fury. Thousands of tanks pulled back, like a storm tide ebbing down a flotsam-strewn shore. Wounded Knights and Titans limped from the jungle of heaped machines to stand at the plain's edge. Thousands died in the hours after the battle faded, their air and fuel finally running out, their crews dying in choking silence. Grey rain fell from the smoke-bloated clouds onto the fires that still burned on the wreckage-crusted plain.

Twelve hours later the Iron Warriors began to withdraw from the surface altogether. Within three weeks Tallarn was all but silent.

One week later General Gorn and his command cadre set foot inside the Sightless Warren.

Four weeks later, when no trace of the Iron Warriors or their allies could be found, a signal was sent to all loyalist forces on the planet, and transmitted by astrotelepathy far beyond the system.

Imperium victor*, it read.* Tallarn stands.

AFTERWORD

Ten million tanks!

In many ways it's a phrase I wish that I had never said out loud. It was at one of the Horus Heresy Weekenders, and I was on a panel talking about the next book I was working on. I think I said something like: 'The Battle of Tallarn was big, really big. It took a year, and there were ten million tanks involved. Ten million tanks!'

Within the hour it was a Twitter hashtag (*#TenMillionTanks!*) and four years later it still crops up when people talk about Tallarn in the Horus Heresy. Ah, the power of the meme.

The only problem was that the stories I was going to write – which make up the book you are holding – aren't about *#TenMillionTanks!* and they never were going to be.

So why say it?

Part of the answer is to do with scale and research. I did a lot of planning for these stories. I read every scrap of information published about the Battle of Tallarn: the small asides in games written in the 1980s, all of the write-ups in every Imperial Guard Codex, and the mentions in old articles from White Dwarf. Some of those sources were contradictory, of course, but there was a core of facts.

'It was the biggest armoured engagement in Imperial history.'

'It lasted for close to a year.'

'It was estimated that there were ten million tanks and war machines involved, and by the end there were a million wrecks on the surface.'

Now, the largest armoured engagement in human history so far is thought to have been between about six thousand tanks and four thousand aircraft. If you add those figures together on the basis that they are both types of war machine, it gives 0.1 per cent of the forces apparently involved in the fighting on Tallarn.

So it's a pretty big battle. The *#TenMillionTanks!* fact gets that scale over really directly. It's a staggering figure, and one that has always stuck with me.

But why do I sometimes wish I had kept that oh-so-juicy phrase behind my teeth? Because it sets up an expectation that the stories I was going to write would be all about seas of tanks shooting the hell out of each other. And that was not at all what I intended to write.

Having got to this afterword you probably know that, while there is a lot of tank-killing-tank action, the touted *#TenMillionTanks!* do not take centre stage. And that's because what drives the stories in this book are five basic questions:

How did the Battle of Tallarn start?

What was it like for those fighting the war on the ground?

Why did it become so big?

Why did the Iron Warriors come to Tallarn?

Why did the battle end?

That in itself was a fairly daunting list of points to address, given that the conflict was so huge and lasted for so long. In the end I decided that the battle just wouldn't suit a conventional single story structure – what was going on was too big, and had too many strands to put into a traditional Horus Heresy novel. Like the wider series, I wanted a feeling of there being more stories than could ever be told, and that there were truths and secrets that even those who found themselves at the heart of the action would never learn. One of the concepts that my editor, Laurie Goulding, and I used when talking about the possible structure of this book was the Battle of the Atlantic during World War II. There have been separate novels and films set in that conflict that focus, for example, on allied destroyers escorting convoys, others that are just about U-boat crews, and others still that are set a long way from the fighting, focusing on the role of code-breakers and spies. Or, to put it another way, stories about what it was like at the sharp end on both sides, and stories about all of the secrets that drove the strategic flow of the conflict. It's one narrative, across many stories.

The solution that I settled upon was not to write one story that tried to address everything, but several that would each focus closely on one perspective of what was going on.

'Executioner' is the story that shows the experience of the rag-tag human tank crews facing the Iron Warriors immediately after the invasion. There could be different stories about any number of other tank crews, but by focusing very closely on Tahirah's squadron, I wanted to try and convey not just the action, but the very human aspect to the battle, facing off against legionaries purely because they have to. 'Siren' goes back and gives the answer to why the battle blooms out to an even larger scale after the Iron Warriors meet this slightly unexpected resistance on the surface.

'Ironclad' looks at why the Iron Warriors came to Tallarn in the first place, and why they later quit the field, leaving the loyalists victorious…

…and 'Witness' is a brief footnote about the price of that loyalist 'victory'.

The stories are all largely unconnected by characters (that three-headed son of the Hydra, Jalen, not withstanding), but was does connect them is that they are all stories of individual heroism, betrayal and tragedy. However, the decisions made

by the characters in these stories do have wider and deeper implications, implications that they themselves are unaware of and will never live to see. Tahirah, Akil, Brel, Kulok, Lycus, Kord, Iaeo, and Hrend all reflect the idea that huge events can hinge around the actions of a few whose deeds will never be remembered, and whose lives are overlooked in the annals of history.

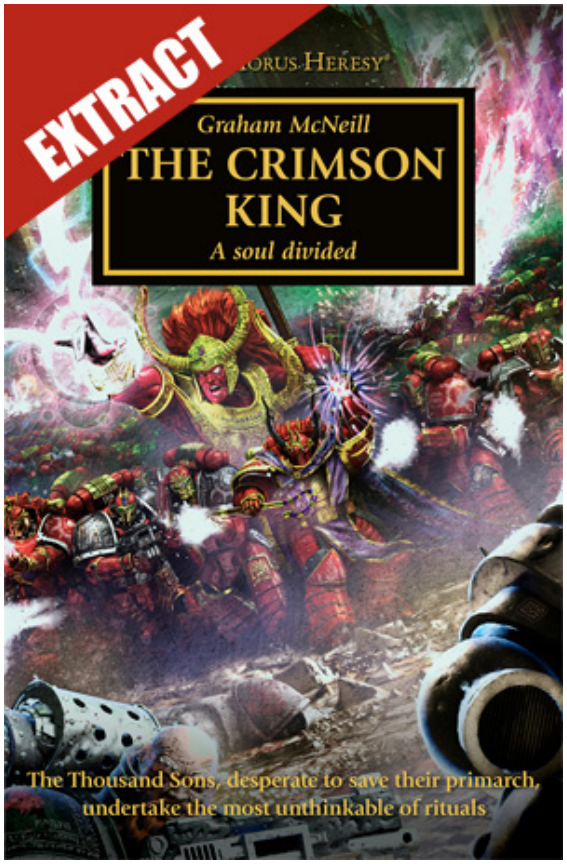
Personally, I reckon that's more interesting than ten million tanks.

John French
December 2016

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novels *Praetorian of Dorn* and *Tallarn: Ironclad*, the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile*, *Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*, including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

An extract from *The Crimson King*.


EXTRACT
ORUS HERESY
Graham McNeill
THE CRIMSON KING
A soul divided
The Thousand Sons, desperate to save their primarch, undertake the most unthinkable of rituals

‘The horizon is wrong,’ said Hathor Maat, and Ahriman felt the psychic pressure of the Pavoni adept’s power as he altered his internal biology to better cope with the magnificent orbital’s disorientating perspectives.

‘In what way?’ asked Ahriman.

‘In the way that there isn’t one.’

That wasn’t exactly true, but Hathor Maat had a point. There *was* a horizon, just not one immediately recognisable as such.

The Torquetum was an open, latticework globe of nine interlocking rings in constant motion. The smallest was thirty-six kilometres in diameter, the largest fifty-four. Viewed through the oculus on the bridge of the *Khemet* it had seemed impossibly fragile, yet its dimensions were the equal of Calth’s orbital anchorages.

Matching speed and aspect, the hawk-winged Stormbird had borne the six Legion warriors to the edge of a glittering forest of warp vanes on the inner face of the Torquetum’s equinoctial ring.

Perspective made its structure taper as it arced overhead in a gentle upward slope before reaching its apex of curvature and reversing to descend behind them. Each ring’s curve was perfectly proportioned, and at the centre of the slowly rotating concentric arrangement was a bronzed sphere held fast by a connecting shaft running between two polar braces.

Transhuman biology combined with powered battleplate should have rendered the Legion warriors immune to vertigo, but the orbital’s incredible structure was doing its best to test that. Even Lucius of the Emperor’s Children and Sanakht of the Athanaeans, consummate bladesmen both, stepped cautiously.

Tolbek of the Pyrae was a coiled spring, his ascendant power simmering close to the surface. Ahriman’s Corvidae Practicus, Sobek, kept close to his master, doing his best to conceal his spatial discomfort.

Only Menkaura appeared unaffected, the venerable battle-seer revelling in their disquieting surroundings.

‘A magnificent structure,’ he said, as a crystal-and-bronze arrangement of oculus lenses, encrusted with psychic resonators, slid soundlessly through space a thousand metres overhead.

Ahriman nodded and recited a Corvidae mantra, easing his consciousness into the lower enumerations. The churning sensation in his gut subsided only slightly.

‘True,’ he agreed, lifting his gaze to the vast maelstrom of warp energy filling the void beyond the Torquetum’s wirework structure, ‘but its masters have chosen to observe a uniquely dangerous phenomenon.’

‘The Eye of Terror,’ whispered Menkaura, the words echoing like a curse within Ahriman’s helm.

‘A name freighted with familiarity, though I cannot remember knowing it until recently.’

‘Indeed,’ said Menkaura. ‘As though this area of space has always cleaved to the name and only now chooses to reveal it.’

‘An interesting theory,’ said Ahriman. ‘Further discussion is perhaps best saved until our mission is complete.’

Though apparently open to the void, an integrity field larger than anything Ahriman had previously encountered maintained a breathable atmosphere within the Torquetum’s rings and kept the full force of the Eye at bay. Every surface crackled with warp ghosts, flickering images at the corner of the eye that vanished as soon as they were noticed.

‘The structure is misnamed,’ said Sobek, sickly warp light reflecting on his helm’s coppered visor. The crimson of his armour reminded Ahriman of sunsets reflecting from the Tizcan pyramids. The original ones, not the skeletal ruins scattered in the lightning-wracked deserts of their adopted refuge.

‘How so?’ said Tolbek, dropping to one knee and placing a palm on the metal deck plates. Blue flames sprang to life around his black gauntlet, slithering from his arm like questing snakes in search of prey.

Sobek waved his *heqa* staff, its ivory length topped by a mass of carven eyes. ‘It more resembles a vast armillary sphere. A primitive heliocentric model of the celestial vault, with a spherical framework of rings representing astral longitudes and latitudes.’

Ahriman moved past his Practicus, kneeling at a five-metre-wide focus-aperture in the ring upon which they had landed. No matter that the equinoctial portion of the Torquetum was a kilometre wide and a hundred metres thick, it still felt absurdly fragile to be moving at speed through the void.

Perfectly framed within the aperture’s lens was the bronzed sphere at the heart of the Torquetum. Exactly fifteen kilometres in diameter, the geocentric rings encircling it turned with artful grace.

Ahriman’s eyes told him the globe was below him, but the knot of vertigo in his gut insisted he should be falling *upwards*.

‘So if this is an observatory, where are the observers?’ said Tolbek, extinguishing the flames enveloping his gauntlet. ‘We are here at the appointed site, and should not linger in open space where the dogs of Russ might catch our scent. We have not the strength to defend ourselves.’

The Pyrae had ever been the bluntest of psychic disciplines among the Legion, but with the inevitable turning of the Great Ocean, their Fellowship was now in ascendance. As the seersight of the Corvidae waned, the Pyrae’s strength waxed.

Yet for all Tolbek’s brusqueness, Ahriman had been wondering the same thing. The reply to their hail from the *Khemet* had been binaric only, no vox or pict.

A set of coordinates and a precise time.

Ahriman had a flash of premonition and rose to his feet as a seamless panel slid open in the curvature of the ring. A curiously angled set of steps was revealed – midnight-black marble with traceries of sapphire veins. Sanakht's jackal and hawk blades flashed from their sheaths, glittering white and black. Lucius had his sword drawn fractionally faster, and his loathsome whip coiled in the air like a serpent.

'Perhaps this is them?' said Sobek.

Ahriman blinked away the disorientating impression that the steps within were somehow inverted as a group of figures wrought from chrome and jet emerged. Their heads were featureless ceramic ovoids with mercury-bright sigils glittering like brands at their centre. No two were alike, and Ahriman saw crude goetic echoes in their arrangement.

Names? Perhaps drawn from the seventy-two daemons evoked by the Scribe of Baphomet?

'Ah, of course,' said Menkaura, turning to Sanakht. 'Your Athanaean's inability to discern the thoughts behind the vox becomes clear.'

'Robots?' said Hathor Maat, casting his gaze over the porcelain-skulled automata. 'They sent *robots?*'

Ahriman heard his sneer, an all too common reaction from the Pavoni adept since their harrowing on Prospero.

The automata advanced on the Thousand Sons, the smoothness of their movements telling of the love and craft that had gone into their creation. Such purity of purpose brought to mind the duel between Lucius and Sanakht, the instant before the scarred swordsman launched his final blow.

Ahriman's seersight saw black flames within the automata.

He shook his head. 'These are not robots.'

Yokai.

Ahriman recognised the sigil as a word form belonging to a long-vanished empire of Old Earth, a mythical creature of some kind, but its deeper meaning eluded him.

Atharva would have known. His abrasive Corvidae brother had been fascinated by the legends of the Dragon Nations. He would have told them everything there was to know of the yokai: etymological analysis of the name, folk tales and all manner of esoteric trivia. But Atharva had left the Legion decades ago to join the Crusader Host and was almost certainly incarcerated somewhere on Terra. Perhaps he was the lucky one, spared the humbling at the hands of the Wolves. The Thousand Sons wore the shame of their defeat like a shroud, and the Crimson King was yet to decree when their mourning would end.

Or if it ever would.

Hathor Maat had dismissed the nine yokai as robots, and the comparison was inescapable. Though crafted in imitation of perfected human anatomy, like the legendary king of the Myrmidons, their blue-steel forms were still undeniably mechanical. Slender-limbed and graceful, Ahriman saw implacable strength in their forms coupled to aetheric energies burning within each skull.

‘If they’re not robots, what are they?’ asked Lucius, the warp energy within the yokai invisible to him.

‘Perhaps something similar to the *goylem* of the Six Orders?’ suggested Sobek.

‘These are neither crude nor unshaped,’ replied Ahriman.

‘So much more than robots,’ said Sanakht, his silver-faced death mask helm reflecting the automata’s aetheric fire. ‘More akin to tutelaries summoned into exquisite host bodies.’

‘Tutelaries?’ spat Tolbek, his hand tightening on the inlaid serpent-scale grip of his sword. The light of his helm lenses flickered with immaterial flame.

‘What’s a tutelary?’ asked Lucius as his whip twitched in anticipation of violence.

Amon had counselled against allowing the Phoenician’s warrior to be part of this venture. Ahriman and the primarch’s equerry seldom agreed these days, yet on this they were in accord. But watching Lucius hack his way through the crystal forest to Sanakht’s tower, Ahriman had seen how closely the hateful swordsman’s fate was bound to theirs.

All the pieces matter.

‘Warp entities,’ said Menkaura. ‘Boon companions, or so we believed, called from the Great Ocean to boost our powers, aid our divinations and shed light on the mysteries.’

‘Let me guess, they turned on you?’

Menkaura nodded. ‘Indeed they did. How did you know?’

‘You can only keep a dog on a leash so long before it remembers it’s a wolf,’ said Lucius, the fingers on his sword hand flexing. ‘Should we be worried?’

‘I do not believe so,’ said Ahriman, studying the *invocatus* formulae etched around the bright sigils. ‘These are compelled to obedience where ours were allowed to come and go as they pleased.’

‘Then the Torquetum’s observers show more caution then we ever did,’ said Menkaura.

The yokai halted before the Thousand Sons, and Ahriman resisted the urge to rise into a more warlike enumeration. After Prospero, his natural inclination had turned from inquisition to suspicion. He awaited some form of communication. His armour could translate binaric quickly enough for legitimate conversation, but as he formed his words in the machine-cant of the Mechanicum, another figure emerged from the ring’s structure.

Compact and with an economy of movement that put Sanakht to shame, she was swathed in a simple devotional robe of saffron, cinched at the waist by a black sash. Her face was open and ascetically androgynous, with a skull shaven bare save for a trio of braided scalp locks hanging down to the backs of her knees.

One eye was cataract-blind, the other swimming with colour, as though coated with a film of petrochemicals. A practitioner of the *artes* – one whose power was great, yet altered by immaterial energies.

The yokai parted and she bowed deeply.

‘Greetings, travellers,’ she said. ‘I am Temelucha, Mistress of the Tartaruchi.’

Ahriman returned her bow. ‘And I am Ahzek Ahriman–’

He almost added *proud son of Magnus the Red,* but settled instead for, ‘a warrior of the Crimson King.’

Temelucha smiled, pretending not to notice his hesitation.

‘My order knows of you and Magnus the Red,’ she said. ‘The Great Ocean echoes to your sire’s name.’

Wary now, Ahriman hid his surprise and said, ‘You know our purpose in coming here?’

Temelucha bowed again and gestured to the opening through which she and the yokai had emerged.

‘The same reason that draws all travellers with questions to the Torquetum,’ she said, her warp-sheened eye glittering with witch-fire. ‘You seek answers from the Iron Oculus.’

Following Temelucha and the yokai through the portal, Ahriman felt a wrenching sense of dislocation, a bilious tremor in the belly, like a starship crashing from the Great Ocean. His auto-senses shrieked with static, distorting his every sense as its systems struggled to form an image in his visor.

A savage rush of vertigo slammed through Ahriman, and he gripped his heqa staff tightly. The need to vomit climbed his gullet, and he unsnapped the seals of his helm, tearing it from his gorget to draw in a sucking breath.

‘Take a moment to balance your elements and the feeling will pass,’ said Temelucha.

Ahriman nodded, not yet trusting he could speak without sounding like a fool. His thoughts were scattered like knucklebones in a casting, and he eased his mind into the ordered thought forms of the lower enumerations before opening his eyes.

The breath caught in his throat as he found himself at the centre of a glass platform adrift in an endlessly unfolding tesseract of crystalline stairways, rising and falling or intersecting at impossible angles, defying perspective like the mythical works of the Niderlanter Knight.

Distant figures endlessly climbed with weary steps, but skewed angles and dazzling reflections quickly obscured them. Ahriman shook off a curious melancholy at the sight and turned to his more immediate surroundings.

The platform was translucent and enneagonal, with one of the yokai at each of its edges. Their placement was that of the symbol of Thothmes, a potent ward to secure those within from scrying.

His companions surrounded him, all but Lucius similarly beset by the disorientating change in their surroundings. Sobek was on his knees, eyes wide and body taut as he struggled to remove his helmet.

+Sobek?+ said Ahriman in an urgent mind-pulse.

His Practicus nodded and used his eye-topped staff to push himself to his feet. Sobek's skin was pale and drawn, his flesh waxy.

+Sobek?+ repeated Ahriman. +Are you effective?+

+I am,+ confirmed Sobek, bending to retrieve his helm.

Ahriman turned from Sobek as Sanakht's voice whispered in his mind, hidden and subtle.

+Do you see? The inscriptions below our feet?+

Ahriman looked down. The depths of the glass was filled with coiled golden script, rippling as though viewed through water.

+Raptures?+ he managed. +I do not recognise them.+

+Look closer,+ pressed Sanakht.

Ahriman stretched out his will, attempting to impose a measure of solidity to the formulae swimming within the glass, but they resisted easy interpretation. He exhaled slowly and rose into the third enumeration, his clarity returning as his mind's eye picked out arrangements he *did* recognise.

+Athanaean constructions?+

+Variant rapture forms of those we use to craft phantasms in the minds of enemy warriors,+ replied Sanakht with an almost imperceptible nod. +Amid such impossible surroundings, we should not take even that which appears incontrovertibly real at face value.'

+Good advice,+ replied Ahriman, lifting his gaze to the edge of the platform and seeing vast processional stairs rise up before him, each step cohering the exact instant his eyes beheld it.

Unlike the tessellated stairs surrounding them, these climbed arrow-straight for hundreds of metres towards a magnificent structure: an ornamented temple with a many-tiered tower of multiple upturned eaves. Its silver-and-jade pillared facade was monolithic, with a black gate of lacquered wood at its centre. Stone dragons stood watch at either end of its eaves, and once again Ahriman wished he'd shared Atharva's enthusiasms for the cultures of Old Earth.

'What is that?' asked Ahriman.

‘It is the *Kyaung*, the Silver Pavilion, wherein dwells the Iron Oculus,’ explained Temelucha. ‘It is what you came for.’

That was truer than she knew, but Ahriman chose not to elaborate on the Crimson King’s purpose in sending them here.

He nodded and said, ‘We are ready.’

Ahriman climbed the stairs alongside Temelucha, looking to unmask the raptures the plaza below had wrought, but he could see nothing beyond the myriad shifting stairways and the looming temple. Great power had gone into the creation of this phantasmagoria, and Ahriman took a moment to study its presumed architect.

Temelucha’s skin was sunless, her curious eye a sign of great control over her abilities. To have endured so obvious a mutation and its attendant consequences while retaining her humanity spoke volumes as to her strength of will.

Ahriman’s warriors climbed behind him in echelon: Sobek, Hathor Maat and Sanakht to his left, Menkaura, Tolbek and Lucius to his right. The yokai flanked them, the warp entities bound to their mechanised bodies guttering like banked furnaces. Despite the tutelaries’ betrayal, a shocking reversal that had gutted the Thousand Sons’ defence of Prospero, Ahriman still missed Aaetpio’s soothing presence.

‘Might I ask a question?’

‘Of course,’ said Temelucha, ‘but the Iron Oculus has the answers you seek. I fear I will be a poor substitute.’

‘A modest answer,’ said Ahriman with a short bow, ‘but one I am disinclined to accept.’

Temelucha smiled. ‘Ask and I will endeavour to answer.’

‘You said you were the Mistress of the Tartaruchi,’ said Ahriman, gesturing to the temple above. ‘The name implies a role of guardianship.’

‘You have read the Akhmim Gospels of Esdras, Master Ahzek,’ said Temelucha.

‘The Syriac translation, many years ago,’ replied Ahriman, understanding Temelucha was merely stating a fact, not asking a question. ‘That copy has, sadly, been lost.’

‘When the wolves brought the fire?’

Ahriman nodded.

Prospero’s fall was a raw wound to his heart, but the pain came not from its doom, rather the horror of what had been lost in the ashes. An incalculable repository of hard-won knowledge and earned experience burned like the priceless texts of Persepolis; millennia of accumulated wisdom torn from existence in a wilful act of intellectual vandalism.

‘Prospero’s death was a loss to all mankind, not just the Thousand Sons,’ said Ahriman, and the pain of such woeful understatement almost broke his heart anew.

‘The Iron Oculus tells us that knowledge is never lost,’ said Temelucha without breaking stride. ‘It can fade like forgotten tales that sink into the mire of memory, remembered only by lonely spinners of verse, until it is needed and rises once more into dreams.’

‘Poetic, but you did not answer my question.’

‘You did not ask a question,’ pointed out Temelucha.

‘Very well,’ said Ahriman. ‘Is the Iron Oculus your prisoner?’

Temelucha smiled and said, ‘The writings of Esdras claim the Tartaruchi were once angels, and that their vengeful god set them before the gates of an infernal prison to guard against the return of a great devil.’

She gave Ahriman the look of a scholar jaded by too many garlanded histories to be impressed by such ancient hyperbole.

‘Once again, you evade answering.’

Irritation, quickly masked, shadowed Temelucha’s face. Clearly she was unused to her words being so carefully scrutinised, but had likely never met warrior-scholars of the Thousand Sons.

‘The Iron Oculus is shackled to the Torquetum, yes, but through no design of ours.’

‘So someone imprisoned it?’

‘Perhaps, but the Iron Oculus never speaks of itself.’

‘And you do not ask?’

‘What would be the benefit?’

‘Knowledge,’ said Ahriman. ‘The rendering of things unknown into fact. To trust the words of so powerful a captive without knowing why it was imprisoned seems somewhat incautious.’

‘We have faith in our purpose,’ replied Temelucha.

‘Faith?’ said Ahriman, unable to keep the venom that had been building within him since Prospero’s death from his voice. ‘All faith teaches is the virtue of not questioning, of blindly accepting dogma and holding things as sacred merely because they were deemed so in an earlier age by less enlightened souls.’

‘Then why are you here if not in faith that your questions will be answered?’

‘It is not faith that brings me here.’

‘Then what does?’

‘The will of the Crimson King,’ said Ahriman as they reached the top of the stairs and the majesty of the Silver Pavilion.

A plaza of frost-rimed cobbles spread before the temple, and snow fell in flurries of glittering dust. Flakes landed on Ahriman’s armour, glistening for a

fleeting moment before melting like teardrops.

More of the Tartaruchi awaited them, eight adepts clad in loose-fitting robes of deepest blue and each bearing a unique symbol stitched over their heart. Their arms were bare and heavily tattooed, a mix of fractal spirals, number sequences and recursive labyrinths.

Like Temelucha, their eyes were warp-touched – one blinded, the other all-seeing. The symbolism was not lost on Ahriman. He wondered if the Tartaruchi were aware of the Prosperine significance of their mutation. A second thought came on the heel of the first.

Had Magnus the Red been here before?

Arrayed to left and right, like regiments on a parade ground, hundreds of yokai stood in ordered ranks, motionless but for the aetheric flames within them. Temelucha marched between the mechanised host bodies as the other members of her order joined her.

No introductions were offered, nor did Ahriman seek any.

The lacquered black gate swung open at Temelucha's approach, and a pillared hall of porphyry and jade was revealed. Cold light and reflections danced within.

Ahriman followed the Mistress of the Tartaruchi inside, seeing that the entire space of the Silver Pavilion was given over to a multitude of crystal-fronted cabinets, arrayed like trophies in a museum of conquest. The Thousand Sons spread out, examining the displays with scholarly interest. Some cabinets contained elaborately wrought weapons, others artefacts of non-human origin, but most contained freakish skeletal remains.

Ahriman threaded a path between the exhibits, marvelling at the incredible diversity, intuitively knowing this was but a fraction of what the structure contained.

His steps carried him deeper inside, his gaze flitting between the ever more varied items on display: a gleaming endoskeleton surmounted by a silver death's head helm with lambent green eyes and a geometric rune at its forehead; a series of arthropodal creatures with biomechanical stilt-legs; captured nebulae of glittering vapour-light held in jewelled vacuum flasks. The deeper he penetrated, the more obvious it became that the internal dimensions of the temple were subtly *wrong*.

Like Ceryiadha's gardens of rock and bleached gravel, laid out according to the *Sakuteiki*'s exacting specifications, aspects of the museum's contents were revealed or obscured relative to the viewer's perspective. What was visible from one vantage point was hidden from another, and entirely new exhibits were revealed.

Perhaps the entirety of the Silver Pavilion *was* on display; he just had to be positioned correctly within its multi-dimensional space to see it.

Ahriman paused beside a cabinet in which an exquisite suit of bone-white armour was encased. The fluid grace of its artifice spoke of eldar craft, and Ahriman sensed ageless, silent fury chained within. The helm was crafted as a howling spectre, with a blood-red plume coiled on a shoulder guard like a serpent poised to strike.

A long shiverspear was slung at the figure's shoulder and one bloodied gauntlet clenched a tri-bladed throwing weapon. Ahriman needed no seersight to know immobility was anathema to the thing bound to this armour.

'What is this place?' he asked.

'A reminder that not all who seek knowledge ought to find it,' said Temelucha.

Ahriman tapped his heqa staff against the crystal, and he felt the enraged spirit within hunger for his death.

'This is eldar,' he said.

'It is,' agreed Temelucha. 'A soul-eating revenant from the earliest age of their doom. Its witch-kin masters led it here to destroy the Iron Oculus. They failed.'

'And you killed them?'

'What lives within that armour can never truly die.'

Ahriman had studied the eldar myth cycles enough to know their warrior-gods were fated to return when needed most.

He leaned in to the crystal prison and said, 'Your race is dying and you will not save them.'

The spirit of the armour strained against its wards, but the warp craft of the Tartaruchi rendered its fury impotent. With Temelucha at his side, Ahriman followed a spiralling path towards the centre of the Silver Pavilion, keeping one eye on his fellow Thousand Sons as they too drew inwards.

The shifting arrangement of exhibits changed with every step he took. Previously visible artefacts vanished from sight and others appeared in their place.

As Ahriman stepped into the pavilion's centre, he stopped beside the fleshless remains of a fossilised greenskin with a monstrously swollen, hydrocephalic skull.

'How do you come by these exhibits?' he asked.

Temelucha clasped her hands before her.

'The Silver Pavilion contains more secrets than even we know,' she said. 'My predecessor believed that what it chooses to reveal are swept from places within the Great Ocean where past and future collide. She told me that no two souls will see the same thing.'

Her words rang false, but before he could ask more, his steps brought him to the heart of the Silver Pavilion.

Shimmering rainbows of light cascaded from an octagonal shaft rising into the tower he had seen from outside. A pair of screw-stairs – one translucent crystal, the other obsidian – offered ascent, entwined in a double helix.

‘The Iron Oculus awaits at the summit,’ said Temelucha. ‘But only you and I may climb the twin stairs.’

‘We go alone?’

‘Like all who come here.’

Ahriman looked back at his Legion brothers, the yokai and the robed adepts of the Tartaruchi. His warriors knew what to do, and little would be served by disputing the issue of his lone ascent to the bound oracle.

He nodded to Menkaura and Sobek. His Practicus returned the nod, his body thrumming with barely suppressed tension.

Ahriman approached the corkscrewing stairs.

Each step was engraved with golden lettering, but where the words on the platform below were virtually illegible, these were phosphor-bright and easily read. *Another Prosperine echo.* This time of the paved approach to the Palace of Wisdom in the heart of lost Tizca. The marble slabs leading to the palace had been engraved with aphorisms from the Great Library’s most lauded contributors.

The first crystal step read: *The higher we are placed, the more humbly we should walk.*

Ahriman grinned mirthlessly as he read the obsidian step: *From the errors of others, a wise man corrects his own.*

‘Choose your path, Ahzek Ahriman,’ said Temelucha. ‘And choose wisely.’

Ahriman looked up into the falling borealis of light.

And chose obsidian.

Each step brought fresh words of wisdom. After the fourth step Ahriman stopped reading them. They were nothing he did not already know. The museum faded from sight as he climbed, but he had expected as much, suspecting this would be a metaphorical ascent as much as a literal one.

Infinite space unfolded in angles unknown to geometry and curvatures beyond the wit of calculus to solve. A trillion galaxies orbited him, smears of diamond dust on velvet amid rivers of light spun from earlier epochs of existence.

This was the workings of the universe laid bare, the secret face of all creation that some called gods, but which the Thousand Sons called aether. It was vast and empty, yet behind the veil of stars, Ahriman felt the reptilian gaze of a vast and malign consciousness. A pagan soul might claim to feel the eye of the gods upon him, but not Ahzek Ahriman. Not any more.

His only anchor to solidity was the steps, plunging below him to unimaginable depths and rising to dizzying heights. None of it was real, at least in the mundane

sense, but anything a mind could perceive would, in effect, be real, no matter how much the physical world might disagree.

Temelucha climbed the crystal stairs, and they wove around one another like dancers at the first notes of music.

Or gladiators in the opening moments of a deathmatch.

The second image was potent, the rising influence of the Pyrae not entirely robbing him of seersight. Ahriman veiled the thought, risking a glance towards Temelucha. Had she caught his flash of insight? It did not appear so.

Ahriman kept climbing, watching the dance of stars from their gravity-wrought births to their explosive endings. He saw firefly sparks of what must be space-faring civilisations spread and contract in the blink of an eye, dead and forgotten even as he noticed them. Galaxy-wide wars blazed between ancient gods and their immortal enemies, leaving bleeding scars on the fabric of space-time. A thousand empires rose and fell before the collapse of the molecular cloud that gave rise to the solar system.

‘All is dust,’ said Temelucha, barely more than a whisper.

‘Is that what this is?’ asked Ahriman, raising his hand to the natural beauty of the stars. ‘A lesson in the entropic nature of existence, that all things decay to their ending?’

‘Nothing so trite,’ replied Temelucha, a hint of genuine remorse in her tone.

‘Then what?’

‘Call it a future echo of a warning that will go unheeded.’

Ahriman tapped his shoulder guard where a raven’s head was carved within the serpentine halo of his Legion iconography.

‘First Principles of the Corvidae,’ he said. ‘The past is carved in stone, the future an endlessly branching river.’

‘No,’ said Temelucha. ‘It is not.’

Ahriman paused in his ascent and locked eyes with the mistress of the Tartaruchi.

‘This coming from one who stands sentinel over an oracle?’

Temelucha reached across and placed her palm over the Corvidae raven’s head. The light of the universe faded and the sense of being observed by inhuman intelligences was now entirely absent.

The awful silence of non-existence enveloped them both.

‘I have only moments, Ahzek Ahriman,’ said Temelucha, with what he could only interpret as fear of discovery. ‘You should not have come here. Leave now and never return.’

‘I cannot do that,’ he said, puzzled by her urgency. ‘The Crimson King has spoken and I must obey.’

‘It will not always be so,’ said Temelucha. ‘One day you will face him as an enemy.’

‘You have seen such a future?’

‘It is one of many the Iron Oculus has shown us.’

‘Then it is irrelevant,’ said Ahriman, losing patience with Temelucha. ‘Such “future echoes” are meaningless without context. End this charade. Bring me to your oracle and we will see if it even deserves such a title.’

‘As you wish,’ said Temelucha, and the starlight bloomed like trillions of unblinking eyes.

‘All is dust,’ repeated Temelucha. ‘Remember that when all about you is ash and despair.’

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